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By ELEANOR M. INGRAM

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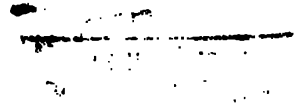

"YOUR FRIEND WILL PAY, MY DELIGHT," HE WARNED

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THE UNAFRAID

BY

ELEANOR M. INGRAM

AUTHOR OF "FROM THE CAR BEHIND," ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLOR
BY EDMUND FREDERICK

PHILADELPHIA & LONDON
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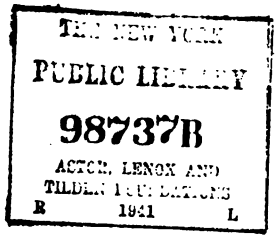

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THE UNAFRAID

CHAPTER I

The City of Encounters

On the old bridge across the sleepy river that threaded the sleepy French town, the two Americans paused to look at each other.

"How do you do?" the girl opened, with a graceful self-possession gay as her laughing eyes. "You do not remember me, Mr. Jack Rupert, but we met at Mrs. Gerard's house, last year. You had just won an altogether astonishing motor-race against an aeroplane, and a great many of us insisted on shaking hands in our enthusiasm. And you looked quite as annoyed as the heroes in novels!"

Her small, wiry compatriot shrugged, with a grimace crossing a face dark as an Italian's, and accepted the offered hand.

"I ain't supposing I'm specially vain," he returned, with a drawl as definitely of New York as every line of his crisp attire. "But I was nearer ready to be run into a garage and hosed off, than to meet a flock of ladies. That was a cross-country

race, and the aeroplane took a course over the fields just after ploughing-time and the spring rains. Well, I followed. I won't deny I think the country is a mistake and a waste of room. But I don't remember forgetting you, Miss Warren."

Delight Warren smiled at him, opening her parasol. She was of that type which seems so fragile to the more heavily built Europeans; tall, slender, with the transparent complexion that accompanies such copper-bronze hair as that massed under her small hat.

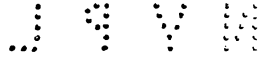
"I am astonished to find you so far from Broadway," she declared.

"I ain't calm about it, myself," was the discontented admission. "But I had a smash, and Mr. Gerard figured out that I was due to rest for a few laps before going back to the track. So I'm going to a name on the map written Montenegro, to get the contract for building some automobile stages for the government. Not that our company wants to build the stages, but we want the advertisement."

"Montenegro!" the girl exclaimed; bright color tinted her face. "Why—I am to be married to a gentleman from there! That is why I am in Tours, with my uncle and aunt."

They regarded each other with the new sympathy of an interest in common.

"Well, I came across on the boat with two men



who registered from that district," mused the racing-driver. "In fact, I guess no bulletins were issued in America about busses being needed there, but Mr. Gerard heard of it through these two friends of his. They belonged to what he called the diplomatic set. I liked them."

"Who were they?" she asked, a little oddly. "It—it was at Mrs. Gerard's I met Lieutenant Balsic."

"This one was called Balsic, only he used a title instead of Lieutenant," was the reply. "He wasn't entered in my class, but he had a cousin with him; we got fairly acquainted. I taught the cousin to drive an aeroplane. He was an army officer; I guess he wasn't planning to fly on cross-country races for amusement. He had three lessons; he only needs about six months more practice."

Delight Warren's flush had gone as swiftly as it had come.

"Lieutenant Balsic has been in Europe for the last three months," she said hurriedly. "Count Stefan Balsic, I—do not know. But I am keeping you, and you seemed in haste. Perhaps, if you are not leaving Tours at once, we shall see each other again."

If he felt surprise at the abruptness, he made no sign, turning indifferent black eyes upon a fisherman who leaned on the bridge's rail.

"Thanks; from what I see of this town, anyone would get arrested for disturbing the peace who tried to do two things in one day, and I just got here this morning. I'll drive on in forty-eight hours, if I live. I ain't supposing I need to say it would be a pleasure to meet you first, Miss Warren."

"Drive on? You have brought your car, then?"

He brought the black eyes back to her face in sincere curiosity.

"Were you guessing I looked forward to walking to Montenegro?"

"Oh! But, there are trains."

"There are," be agreed briefly. "Sometimes I have to use boats, but so far I've been able to sit up and drive a car any place a train can go."

"It is poor driving, they say, where you are going," she told him, giving him her hand in farewell. "I am only on my way to the little convent across the bridge," she added, divining his intended speech. "So I shall do very well alone, that far. Good-by."

He replied a trifle absently, and did not at once continue his walk. Until she had left the bridge, he remained unobtrusively watching the young girl.

Delight was sufficiently American to feel quite at ease alone, even in a foreign city. She walked on, quietly dreaming of the two years she had

passed in the gray convent beyond, and of the new years that were to come. To the gladness of the betrothed about to become the wife, she added an element of happiness possible only to one who is generous. The parents she had lost in childhood had left her rich, and her fiancé was poor. With a protectiveness almost maternal, she delighted in the thought of giving Michael all he had been obliged to forego; all the agreeable superfluities of life. And she meant to give with both hands, not meanly, gift by gift—to place all she possessed in her husband's control, and ask no account.

It had meant practical defiance of her guardians, this marriage. And because she loved her uncle and aunt, Delight had waited the three months they exacted as a test of affection. Hers had been a whirlwind courtship, all glamour and young passion and romance. She had accepted Michael Balsic ten days after their first meeting. Two weeks later, military duty had sent him back to his own country. He had little more income than his officer's pay; he could not afford disobedience.

Delight would have gone with him, then, but for her family. They had begged for enough delay to prove both lovers' sincerity. Now, the period ended, they had reluctantly brought Delight to France, where Michael Balsic was to join them and the marriage to take place.

They had written to each other, the betrothed.

and it was of those letters Delight was musing as she walked. They were wonderful letters, written by a man born of two fire-veined nations, for Michael Balsic's mother had been a Russian. Like a shield, they had warded off all that Mr. Warren had been able to bring against his niece's resolution.

The tug at Delight's gown was very gentle, yet somehow urgent. Startled, she stopped and looked down. A little dog was gazing up at her, with the wrinkled anxiety peculiar to certain of his tribe, eyes fixed and imploring. He was not a beautiful dog, nor of any recognized variety, and as Delight mechanically bent to stroke his head he pressed close against her, shivering in the warm sunshine.

"*Pauv' petit!*" she commiserated, slipping naturally into the language of the convent years. "What is it, then?"

The puppy licked her gloved fingers and whined. She saw, then, that he was pitifully thin and hollow-eyed, and guessed the truth.

It was not in Delight Warren to pass by any hungry creature. She looked about for means of relief, and spied a butcher's shop a few doors away.

The dog followed, indeed he clung to her.

"Please give me all the meat you think a dog could eat," Delight requested of the shop's proprietor. "And it will have to be cut small, if you will be so good, because he is a very little dog."

The butcher, who wore an imperial, complied after a survey of the animal; cutting up a paperful of raw beef.

"If he eats that, he will suffer ills of stomach," he observed impersonally. "But, what will you? It is gayer to die of a surfeit than to starve."

The girl paused, paper in hand, dismayed.

"It will make him ill?"

"Of a certainty, mademoiselle."

The puppy whimpered, and pulled at her dress, trembling with eagerness. Doubtfully his benefactress led him outside and put down the food.

Apparently the dog had never heard of indigestion. Delight waited a few moments, watching him gulp down the meat, then turned away. But hungry though he was, the little animal left his food and ran after her, whining protest. Patiently indulgent, the girl turned back and waited until his attention was again centred on the beef.

Her second attempt at escape was as distinct a failure as the first. At her initial movement, the little dog was beside her, fixing on her face a gaze of devoted and boundless faith. What was to be done? Neither the convent nor Mr. and Mrs. Warren would tolerate such a guest. Moreover, an interested group was forming.

"Oh, doggy, doggy!" she remonstrated, touched and distressed.

"He has already had enough, mademoiselle,"

said a smooth, strong voice behind her, in English perfectly accented as her own and as alien to the simple, bourgeois neighborhood.

The girl turned with a start, and encountered the steady, steel-gray eyes of the man who had spoken. She had not noticed the motor-car halted on the opposite side of the narrow street, but she saw it now, and that by his dress the gentleman had descended from it.

"Thank you," she answered. "But he insists on following me, and he must not."

He did not offer the cheap and obvious compliment possible. Delight made no mistake of under-estimating his motive in speaking, or his class. He towered over her, superb in height and physique; a grave, stately man of perhaps thirty-five with the bearing of accustomed authority.

"You have fed him. Pass on and leave him, mademoiselle."

The advice did not deceive her. She smiled in spite of her perplexed responsibility.

"Would you do that, monsieur?" she challenged.

He said nothing, but she was answered.

"Yet I *cannot* keep him," she added, as much to herself as to the man. "And he is such a tiny dog—he will be hungry again, and frightened."

Still the stranger said nothing. And suddenly Delight did an outrageous thing, a thing she could never afterward explain.

"Monsieur, I give him to you. Will you take him?" she exclaimed impulsively.

The gray eyes met hers, not with surprise or anger or pleasure, but with a glance that cleaved deep as a clean blade. The girl's breath caught, for a moment street and witnesses drifted away from her and she stood alone with this man. Quite helplessly she held her eyes open to him like an open book for his reading.

"Thank you," he said, without irony. "I accept, mademoiselle."

The chauffeur of the car came running at a signal. His master spoke to him, in a language strange to the American, a few concise words of direction. The chauffeur saluted without reply, picked up the dog and carried it back to the limousine.

Sanity had come back to Delight, and with it overwhelming embarrassment. But her companion kept his hand on the reins of the situation.

"Let me accompany you out of the district we have disturbed," he suggested. "The good citizens are interested."

"Thank you," she murmured. "I was on my way to the convent."

The good-natured spectators drew back, and the two walked side by side up the old street.

Step by step Delight's embarrassment fell from her, without reason, without speech from her companion. Somehow she knew that he had under-

stood the incomprehensible—that she had gained, not lost in his opinion.

"You have lived happily, mademoiselle?"

Amazed, she looked up, the question was so irrelevant and so gentle.

"Why, yes," she wondered.

"And you expect to be happy in the future?"

"I am sure of it," she returned with confidence, her face lighting radiantly.

He regarded her strangely, with a sombre intensity.

"You are strong, mademoiselle, and have yet to meet that which is stronger. But it will be well to remember that it exists."

They were at the convent gate. Before Delight found a reply, her companion had raised his hat and left her.

As the gate opened, she looked back. The stranger was already crossing to his car.

CHAPTER II

The Convent of Delight

Delight Warren stopped in the pleasant French sunshine, laughing eyes remonstrant. It was in the convent garden, and the nun opposite clasped the pair of shears with which she had been cutting roses before the American's arrival; clasped them with a firmness indicative of her resolution.

"But, *ma soeur*, I visit!" protested the girl. "I do not come as a pupil, now, but to visit those of my friends who are still here. Why should I change my frock?"

"My child, you would demoralize my flock. What, at the end of Lent, when they are removed from vanities of all kind, you would throw them into a fever with that gown!"

"It is the best mode, *ma soeur!*"

"As they would be well aware," severely. "No; your simple frock of two years ago is still here. In my room you may change before joining my pupils."

"Oh, very well," the girl yielded. "But for a bride—that is not gay! I am to be married this week."

The color that flushed her delicate face was

lovely as the glance of blended pride and ardor that half-challenged, half-deprecated comment. But the older lady's brow grew troubled beneath the smooth band of white linen crossing it.

"I know. I have heard of this marriage, which is opposed by your uncle and aunt; who surely are wiser than you. You have been wilful from childhood, Délice. With a French girl, such a scandal could not arrive—her guardians would choose for her."

"I will marry where I love. Is that wrong, Sister Genevieve?"

"You marry Monsieur Michael Balsic, of Montenegro?"

"You know him, *ma soeur?*"

"I have heard of him. The gossip of Paris reaches even here. I believe he is considered handsome?"

"Oh, certainly! But—," on guard, "it is not for that! He is so gay, so good!"

The nun smiled, a little sadly.

"You are a child, Délice Warren, for all your two years in Paris and New York since you left us."

The girl understood, raising her head with a quick, decided movement; her large, clear brown eyes fired and became all womanly.

"No, *ma soeur.* I know what you would say. No doubt Monsieur Balsic has lived as men live, not in a convent. Oh, I have heard enough warn-

ings! And I know their cause—Michael is poor. Well, I am rich enough for both. May I go in, Sister Genevieve?"

"Will you change your dress, Délice?"

Delight's smile flashed back.

"Oh, if I must—!"

Sister Genevieve stepped aside from the gray, arched doorway.

But the signs of the world are not so easily removed. When Delight slipped into the demure group of promenading girls, there remained quite enough to excite those older pupils, who, as juniors, had known her two years before. The very fragrance about her, the dainty frivolity of the shoes and silk hosiery visible beneath the plain, convent frock, the artful arrangement of her shining auburn braids massed over each small ear were distracting. And the news of her marriage had crept in to add a glamour.

"All of the girls of your age have gone, except me," said a plain, sallow girl. "I—perhaps I will always stay. I am neither rich nor beautiful like you, Délice."

"But you may be happiest, Julie," spoke a young Russian girl who was to leave "finished" in a few months. "I have heard many tales of the Count Balsic. He is half Russian, you know, and a diplomat. So my father hears of him. He is a great noble—but—"

"But it is not Count Balsic I am to marry,"

Delight interrupted, her expression darkening with an anxiety she herself scarcely understood. "I am engaged to his brother, Monsieur Michael Balsic. He has explained many things to me about Count Balsic. They are enemies."

She broke off. It was impossible to repeat to these children the bitter story of family feud Michael had told her; told with his handsome blond face made almost ugly by its dangerous passion.

"Then I will tell you a story I heard," volunteered the Russian. "No one thought I listened, but I did. In Paris, last winter, there was a gentleman who stole a purse from Count Balsic's room. A young army officer, he was, and visiting there when he saw the purse on a table. He must have needed money to the point of desperation; he took it. But he was seen, and seized by the servants and an aide of the Count. The poor young man begged Count Balsic not to have him arrested and disgraced; he said that he had a wife who would be left even without money to return to her own people. Your fiancé's brother wrote a check for a thousand francs.

"'If you are asking charity, take this,' said he, cold as a stone. 'Justice is another matter. I have sent for the police.' The officer bowed, took the check, sent it to his wife—and shot himself before the police arrived."

There was a general exclamation of delicious horror. Delight was regarded with mingled ad-

miration and pity for her close connection with a tale so romantic.

But the American herself had other emotions. She was in reality much older than her companions, and capable of analysis. Why should anyone be at once so lavish and so cruel? And how could the young officer accept a charity so given?

"Are you frightened, Délice?" questioned Julie softly.

"Why should I be?" she lightly shook off abstraction. "The story is dreadful, but it does not concern me more than any of you. Let us talk of something else. Will you be my bridesmaid, Julie?"

But the story had marred her visit, nevertheless. It clung to her mind with unreasonable persistence, and added to the dread and repulsion with which Michael had taught her to regard his brother; the brother who possessed all he lacked of wealth and influence. For Michael hated Stefan Balsic with a primitive completeness and vigor, nor dreamed of concealing the sentiment.

Delight returned early to the hotel where her people were staying. In deference to the nuns' prejudices, she had a carriage called and drove home. Moreover, she was in no mood for further adventure. The singular half-prediction, half-warning of the stranger to whom she had confided the little dog was another factor in dimming her gayety. There had been something akin to com-

passion in the gray eyes, as she summoned them before her memory. Why? What, in this triumphant hour of love and youth, was there to inspire pity for Delight Warren? Was she too sure of happiness?

In the hall of the hotel an attendant approached her.

"Mademoiselle, just now I conveyed to the apartment a *petit bleu*. Mademoiselle being out, madame received it."

"A telegram for me?"

"Yes, mademoiselle."

Delight hurried upstairs, nervously impatient.

Mrs. Warren met her niece, blue envelope in hand. She was a large, amiable woman, with the pink hues born of much massage and Turkish-bathing used to keep her weight within the limits demanded by Fashion; the occidental prototype of that oriental official, the Holder of the Girdle of Beautiful Forms.

"My dear, I thought best to open it for you," she explained. "It is better, much better to be prepared for—for any disappointment. And, my dear child, always bear in mind that everything is probably for the best."

Delight stood quite still, the chiffon muff slipping from her arm.

"Michael—?" she articulated.

"Yes, from Lieutenant Balsic. He has had the misfortune to break his ankle. His horse fell with

him, it seems. You see, it is nothing serious. But of course it postpones the marriage."

"He says so?"

"Certainly. He cannot travel for some weeks, and you know your uncle must be back in New York by the fifteenth."

There was a furtive relief mingled with her agitation, which the girl was too acute not to translate. Mrs. Warren hailed any circumstance that deferred her niece's wedding with the distrusted foreigner.

Delight automatically picked up the fallen heap of rose-colored chiffon, not looking at her aunt. It seemed to her that all day she had been traveling toward this moment. She saw quite clearly the consequences. She would be taken home to America, since her uncle's presence was required there and a young girl could not remain in France alone. Once in New York, there would be the old battle to recommence, the tricks of chance to reckon with and the difficulty to Michael of coming so far.

"May I have the message?" she requested quietly, her red mouth curving into firmness.

"I thought I had handed it to you. My dear, I am so glad you take matters so sensibly! Would you not like—had you not better lie down? I was so upset for you, my own head aches."

"Thank you," said Delight. "Yes, I will go to my room."

But she did not lie down. Instead, she read

Michael's telegram. Necessarily condensed, the brief sentences yet conveyed a desperate disappointment and anxiety. Michael Balsic knew quite as thoroughly as his fiancée the forces they had arrayed against them. Also, he knew some facts that she did not.

"Wait," he wrote. "I will come in three weeks. Wait, I beseech."

She would not be allowed to wait. In three weeks there would be half a world between them. Unless—

The recollection of Jack Rupert slowly took form within her mind; Jack Rupert, who was going to Montenegro. Her cheeks began to burn before a daring thought. Her maid would be faithful, because Delight Warren could pay for faith. Michael there was no question of trusting. Rupert himself, Rupert of lower New York and the automobile race-track, Rupert renowned for caustic tongue and uncertain temper, was fastidiously nice in honor to the point of being unmodern. Since Michael could not come to her, suppose she went to Michael?

Once entertained, the idea took on reality and life. After all, since she meant to give all her life to Michael Balsic, why should she not go to him bravely and frankly? Why should she risk losing so much to preserve a conventionality?

There was a telephone in the room. Delight went to the instrument.

Minor French towns are not crowded with hotels that catch the American eye. At the first hazard she found the house where Rupert was staying. Or rather, had been staying.

"I am desolated to inform madame that he left an hour ago," the girl was told.

"Left? But he expected to remain much longer!" she exclaimed.

"Madame, he awaited the regulating of his automobile, which was expected to require until to-morrow. But it was brought to him this afternoon, by a miracle of achievement, whereupon he left at once."

"Can you tell me where?"

"Madame, he spoke of the direct route to Italy, I believe, to Bari."

Reluctantly she hung up the receiver and turned away. But her determination was fixed, aroused by the contradiction. She would try the other means, first. She would engage her aunt and uncle to remain on the Continent until Michael was able to join them. If they refused, she would overtake Rupert by train and claim his protection to Montenegro. Once there, Michael would send his people to meet her and take her to his house. She would telegraph her coming to him.

CHAPTER III

Crnagora's Gate

In the narrow street of gayly painted houses, overarched by cobalt-blue sky, the two automobiles faced each other. The chauffeur of the car descending called out volubly, signifying by gestures his demand that the other withdraw—backward—from the blockade. There seemed no immediate likelihood of the demand being met, and a group of grave, stately Montenegrins formed to watch the novel dispute. Automobiles are rare near Antivari, except for those of the royal household; to which neither of these two belonged.

The girl on the wharf looked on with no less amusement than the natives, in spite of her own doubtful situation. The driver of the second car was a Servian, as unintelligible to her as to the American driver, and the outcome promised interest. But Rupert cut short the argument, leaning back in his seat.

"I ain't able to hope you'll understand what we call language in New York," he observed composedly. "But I get you, all right! Go around, yourself."

The blockade promised to endure, but at this juncture a woman leaned from the door of the limousine; a handsome woman, not fine of feature, but highly colored and artificial as a milliner's figurine—and clothed like one.

"Monsieur is American," she said, in difficult English. "He who belongs to a nation so gallant, will not make a lady to lose her boat. I have haste, monsieur—" with a parting of too-red lips over white teeth.

Rupert's black eyes appraised her with an understanding tinged by cynicism; a judgment swift and accurate as those tiny photographs flashed upon a post-card while the subject waits. But he lifted his motor-cap.

"Pleased to oblige," he returned.

Under his hand, his car darted back with a disconcerting ease and speed that scattered the crowd. Opposite the platform he halted; the limousine following, to stop also. The woman descended, graciously nodding to the American.

"I am infinitely grateful, monsieur," she acknowledged. She turned a gold purse in her fingers. "Should I dare—?"

"I wouldn't," drily advised Rupert.

They exchanged a direct glance of equal sophistication, then the woman laughed a little hardly and turned away. The movement brought her face to face with Delight Warren.

The young girl was not a child; she dropped her eyes and would have passed quietly. They were so close that the Frenchwoman's silks and feathers brushed Delight's white-linen suit. But the woman did not pass, instead leaning forward with an intake of breath.

"*La mariée!*" she exclaimed.

Startled, Delight lifted her eyes and encountered the intent, weary eyes of the other. For in the strong sunlight the woman did look weary, even haggard, and there was a heavy purple bruise on one cheek that neither rouge nor powder could conceal.

"Madame?" the girl murmured, with repugnance and offended surprise.

The woman laughed and shrugged.

"Oh, you will learn, where I have! At the Château Balsic—one learns."

She said no more. An officer had dashed up the wharf, flung himself from his horse and came toward the two women. He made no pretence of concealing his haste or his purpose; if he had placed himself between them, his attitude would have been no more plain.

"Madame, you will miss your boat," he signified, with a tone and glance of so much harsh contempt that Delight winced and shrank for the other.

"Oh, I am going," said the Frenchwoman care-

lessly. She looked again at the girl. "*Petite sotte!*" she breathed, passing her.

There was a pause, in which the two left behind surveyed each other, frankly curious.

"Mademoiselle, I have been sent to meet you," the officer said, when Delight, recovering memory, would have passed him, in her turn.

It was difficult to believe this was the same voice that had spoken to the Frenchwoman. Delight had already noted the brilliant and graceful dress of the people, but she had seen nothing comparable to the rich, half-barbaric uniform worn by this young soldier. For he was very young, with a fair, gay face that seemed oddly familiar and all friendly.

"I am Miss Warren," she corroborated, suddenly conscious in every fibre of her strange position. What did he think of her, unchaperoned, breaking every rule of European convention? Why had not Michael come himself, somehow? "I—my maid would come no farther than Italy."

She stopped, furious with herself for the weakness of attempting excuse that seemed to acknowledge her in the wrong. But the officer only bowed.

"The automobile is waiting. May I have the honor of taking you to it."

The automobile! From it the Frenchwoman had come. Delight's heart checked and she felt a sense of vertigo. What was she facing? Did the

beautiful car belong to Michael, then; Michael, whom she had believed so poor? Yet now it was too late for retreat or question. She made a hesitating step forward; vainly searching her recollections for a clue to this new companion's identity. She could not remember that Michael had ever spoken of such a friend.

Jack Rupert had slipped from his seat behind the wheel of his machine and now came up to them. His small dark face was eloquent of relief. The American had had many complicated hours since his countrywoman came to him in the breakfast-room of an Italian inn, both little gloved hands held out.

"I have just missed you all across France," she had told him, laughing eyes wet with sheer content. "Oh, I thought that I was brave, but I would have gone back a score of times if I had not known you were on ahead! And now you will take care of me, will you not?"

He had assumed the charge, grimly capable. He was not more than ten years older than the girl, but he possessed all the world-knowledge she lacked. A few questions assured him that Delight had committed herself; that wild as her flight might be, it was now better to go on than to return and attempt explanations. Indeed, the young girl would not consider a return.

The journey had been undisturbed. All the

way down to Bari, Rupert had deliberately registered Miss Warren, maid and chauffeur; sinking his own identity to shelter her with all possible conventionality. And then the maid had taken fright at the prospect of entering a little-known land, and refused to continue with her mistress. She had deserted at the last moment, when the steamer was about to sail and there was no time to procure a substitute.

"I can cross the Adriatic without a maid," Delight had met the crisis. "You will be with me, Rupert." He had taught her to use his unpreceded name to support the fiction of his being her chauffeur.

He accepted the inevitable without enthusiasm, merely growing a trifle more grim. He was eyeing Fate with sardonic expectancy, awaiting her next antic.

But now his expression was more cheerful than it had been for some days, as he offered his hand to Delight's companion.

"If Miss Warren is going to be connected with you, I guess I ain't likely to get old as fast as I expected," he announced, with his slight drawl. "I ain't denying I'm glad you are one of this party of reception."

"You know this gentleman?" the girl exclaimed, looking from one to the other as they shook hands.

"I almost didn't," returned Rupert, his speculative glance on the officer's costume. "He has changed some since I last saw him. But I taught Captain Lesendra one or two details about handling an aeroplane, on Long Island."

"Danilo Lesendra, our cousin whom Stefan owns without knowing it—" Michael's mocking, bitter voice rang in the girl's memory; the garden at home rose before her, and her fiancé's handsome face, never less handsome than when he spoke of his brother. She faced toward the Montenegrin, her large eyes like burnished copper in her excitement.

"You are Count Balsic's cousin and aide?" she demanded.

There was a curious expression in his eyes; like all of his half-Russian house, he was fairer than was usual in Montenegro, his eyes were blue-black and very clear. But he answered at once and frankly.

"I am, mademoiselle."

She held herself more erect in her triumph and passionate relief.

"There has been a mistake," she said cuttingly. "I am here to marry Lieutenant Michael Balsic. No doubt Captain Lesendra expected a successor to the lady who has left. Mr. Rupert, I think that I see my carriage; will you take me there."

The speech was outrageous, and she knew it.

But she herself felt outraged, and visited all the mistake and her momentary doubt of Michael upon the officer who served Stefan Balsic.

She had met a capable antagonist. Captain Lesendra bowed in a silence that was more effective than any retort, although the heavy crimson ran under his skin. The New Yorker gave him a glance of ironic sympathy, complying with the girl's request.

Her color very bright, Delight hurried on. The open carriage she had seen waiting at the other side of the platform accorded better with her conception of her fiancé's circumstances than did the costly automobile. Why had she not seen it at first, and saved all this? That woman—

The brightly-dressed old man beside the carriage advanced to meet her. Like every man she had seen in this country, he was of fine height and bearing, and wore a long pistol thrust through his scarlet-silk girdle.

"Gospodin Michael Balsic?" she asked, stammering over almost the only Servian word known to her.

He smiled and nodded, producing a letter. She tore it open eagerly.

There were only a few lines, in Michael's florid and caressing style. He thanked her from his heart for her angelic confidence in him; he would pass his life repaying it. Never would he have

dared ask what she had so generously accorded; never would he forget her coming. He was waiting for her, on fire until she was altogether his own. He urged her to start immediately; the drive was long.

Delight raised a glowing face from the reading, and gave her hand to Rupert.

"It is all right," she said happily. "There is no more trouble. This letter is from Lieutenant Balsic. I do thank you more than I can say, Mr. Rupert. Perhaps, later, you will come to see us. I want to thank you better."

"I can't see any special reason why I shouldn't drive you to the place you're going," he retorted, his dark face determined and once more grim. "I guess I've got nothing in the oven that will burn while I'm out. I've brought you so far I'd like to finish the run with you."

"That is good of you," she said gratefully. "But—please do not. You see, it would look a little bit as if we distrusted Lieutenant Balsic. I am perfectly safe, now. Come later, please; and goodby."

With a very dissatisfied expression, Rupert reluctantly yielded, and watched the young girl enter the carriage. The old man mounted beside the driver, and the vehicle clattered away.

When Rupert turned back, Danilo Lesendra had just finished speaking to the Servian chauffeur

of the limousine and was on the point of mounting his own black riding-horse. His foot in the stirrup, the officer lingered to exchange a hand-clasp with the American.

"If you stay in Crnagora, I will see you again," he promised hurriedly. "Now, I must go."

"So I noticed," said Rupert drily. "Have you got time to issue any extra opinions as to whether I'd better follow Miss Warren on this trip?"

"Can you bring her back and prevent her marrying Michael Balsic?"

"Did you guess I'd been pressing her to go ahead, all the way here?" he countered.

"Then," said Danilo Lesendra, "what use would it be?"

He swung himself into the saddle and wheeled his horse up the street, the vari-colored crowd parting to let him pass and closing in behind him. Rupert walked slowly back toward his car, discontent in every line of his small, muscular figure. He had been taken by surprise; never had he contemplated this separation from his charge.

CHAPTER IV

The Man of the Karst

Gray, bleak mountains; incredibly bare, incredibly vast, stretching desolate peaks into the sky itself. Narrow roads clinging to the rocks; often a mere ledge between the precipice below and the towering height above. Through the wild country Delight had traveled hour after hour, until now afternoon took on the shades forerunning sunset. The occasional villages had ceased to interest her. The passersby, mounted on horses or driving laden mules often led by a woman, seemed to her to grow sterner and less ready of smiles as they journeyed nearer and nearer the Albanian frontier.

The happy courage with which she parted from Rupert had left her, long since; not ebbed away, but dropped from her grasp, a lost possession. She had expected no such journey as this; she had fancied Montenegro, so tiny on the maps, a place of short distances and romantic scenes. This iron landscape appalled and terrified her with its savagery, its locked silence.

She was walled round with silence, since no one could understand her speech. Once only she re-

ceived a comprehensible answer to a question put to her escort.

"What is it?" she asked, in an exasperation of nerves, sweeping her hand toward the naked rock-stretches. "Is it like this everywhere? What is this? Is all Montenegro like this place?"

The old man looked back at her, translating gesture and expression rather than words. There was curiosity in his glance at this vivid young alien beauty, and the girl flushed before it.

"Karst," was the emphasized word she distinguished in the answer.

So she learned the name of that strange mountain-desert into which she had followed Michael Balsic and where she was to find, not what she sought, but what she had provoked.

After a time she leaned back and closed her eyes, wearied beyond interest in her surroundings. Revulsion gripped her; suddenly she feared what lay before, what lay behind, and most of all Michael himself, who would be no longer wooer, but husband.

The carriage halted with an abruptness that flung the girl forward in her seat. A sharp command was still ringing in the air, as her eyes flashed open upon a changed scene.

The road was wider, here, and on it were halted a dozen riders, closing the way with wall-like finality. The last sunrays glittered upon their

unfamiliar, bright-hued costume, the gold lettering on their round caps, and the glinting metal of the pistols thrust through their crimson sashes. Superb men, akin to their own mountains, their great height dwarfed that of the leader they watched for commands.

Yet he had seemed tall, in Tours. Indeed, he was six feet in height, but they were inches more. Gazing at him, the girl rose in her place, passing her hand across her eyes with a gesture of helpless bewilderment. She noted vaguely that her two men had thrown their pistols to the road and sat with drooping heads, arms folded. The fact meant little to her. Even when she recognized Danilo Lesendra, his horse drawn to one side of the group, she failed to comprehend what occurred.

"You remember me, mademoiselle?" asked the leader's smooth, strong voice.

Delight drew a swift breath, recollection made certain.

"It was to you I gave the little dog, monsieur," she identified him wonderingly.

He bent his head, less in assent than in study of her, compelling his restless horse to stand. He too wore the rich and unusual uniform, but on him it gave the effect of being worn as a caprice, to the girl who had known him in France. Moreover, his brown hair and gray eyes appeared alienly fair among his dark men of the Black Mountain.

"I failed to present myself, then, mademoiselle," he said. "I am Stefan Balsic. Does the name mean anything to you?"

The girl shrank, paling; her topaz-brown eyes darkened with incredulity and rising fear. This was the man around whom centred so many sinister tales, the brother who denied Michael ever so small a share of his wealth, who even interposed his influence to prevent the younger man's advancement in army or state? Never was one more unlike his portrait. But she controlled herself to a calmness matching his.

"Since I have traveled from America to become the wife of Lieutenant Michael Balsic, naturally I have heard of his brother," she answered. "The afternoon is almost ended; please let us pass. This would be a fearful place at night." Involuntarily she glanced at the hills closing her in, hills where one lost might die of hunger and thirst, a tremor shaking her.

"More fearful than you can guess," he returned. "And more lawless. Yet you would come here, against all warning and all restraint. Miss Warren, Michael will not have left you ignorant that he and I are enemies at every point, in every aim, and have been so for years. Now, when the struggle verges toward its finish, I cannot let you pass to him."

The American uttered an indignant cry, the blood pouring into her face.

"You will not let me pass! How can you control me? You have no right, no right!"

"I have the power," said Stefan Balsic.

"The—power?"

He smiled for the first time in her knowledge of him.

"You are so civilized, mademoiselle, that you cannot conceive power without right. What are you doing in the land of the vendetta and blood-feud, of force and death? You have not come to Cetinje, but to the Albanian frontier. If spilt blood stained, this edge of Crnagora would be a scarlet band with no inch left uncolored. Are you fit for this?"

"But I am a woman," she protested hotly.

"This is not a woman's country, Miss Warren."

She thought of the women she had seen on the roads, even in the cities; their toil-marred bodies, their patient, submissive faces, the contrast between them and the splendid physique and bearing of the men. What did he mean her to understand?

"You are not a peasant," she challenged, angry eyes braving his. "You are of my world. You can do me no harm. Why do you try to frighten me, Count Balsic?"

"YOU WILL NOT LET ME PASS! HOW CAN YOU CONTROL ME?"

"I am world-trained, English-taught, and my mother was a Russian princess," he said slowly. "But I am a Montenegrin of the old blood. Do you know that if one of these men with me leaves Montenegro, on his return he stoops down and kisses the soil that is his? It is bad, Miss Warren, for the one who steps between Montenegro and a Montenegrin."

"What has that to do with me?"

"Are you telling me that you do not know to what use Michael will put your fortune?"

"Certainly not!" flared the girl, flinging back her head. "Nor will I ask him, ever. What is mine shall be his, to use as he chooses. He shall be free of poverty, at last. Will you bid your men draw aside, sir, and let me go on? Captain Lesendra, I was told by Mr. Rupert that you were an honorable officer, his friend—will you see a woman detained by force from her people? Bid these soldiers let me pass."

Both men looked at her, a straight, slim figure standing upright in the carriage; a very frail figure, for all its gallantry, against the fire-red sunset and savage cliffs. Danilo Lesendra lifted his cap, but essayed no reply. Count Balsic answered for him.

"Captain Lesendra is in the presence of his superior officer, and helpless as yourself, made-

moiselle. Nor do I strike you, in this, but Michael. You may not go to him."

"You strike me also," she combatted. "I love your brother, sir."

"I am sorry for that," he said very gravely.

Delight steadied her lips. She felt pitifully confused, even a giddy sense of unreality. If the two men had been less well-bred, had spoken roughly or less in the speech of her own world, this thing might have seemed less grotesquely impossible. Yet it was true, and not to be put aside by her.

"You force me to turn back, then?" she compelled herself to speak. "Very well; I cannot resist. I speak no Servian; give my driver that order and I will go."

The humiliation of the surrender choked her. She sank down on the carriage seat, turning her hot face away from the watchers. Oh, if she had only brought Rupert, as he wished! Now she must drive back to the next village and there spend the night in the hut of some peasant to whom she could not even speak. The next day promised only new embarrassment and perplexities. Could she make a second attempt to reach Michael, or must she return to some city; now alone indeed, without either Rupert or Marthe?

"You have not understood me," said Stefan Balsic.

"No?"

"No. I take you with me. And because there is no other way you can come with honor, I take you as my wife."

Delight gave a low cry, rather of stupefaction than of terror. The proposition was too monstrous, too incredible. This was not the tenth century, but the twentieth.

"That is impossible. You are not in earnest," she retorted, with all the dignity she could command. "We are not savages. In my country we do not play with such subjects, monsieur. I have said that I will go back—tell my men so and end this."

Instead of complying, he brought his horse beside the carriage, so that he and the girl faced each other as they had in the little street in Tours. As then, his eyes were quiet as quiet water.

"Put the idea of play from your mind, Miss Warren," he counselled. "What my forebears would have done without a second thought, is hard to me as few duties I have confronted. Yet have no unnecessary fear; you will be a prisoner of war in my house, no more."

"In—your—house?"

"In my house, because you must not carry the weapon of your wealth to Michael's."

"Why?" she cried. "Why?"

He hesitated.

"I cannot tell you here. Mademoiselle, this scene before my men can do no good. You have met that stronger force than your own will of which I warned you in France. You must come with me."

She no longer doubted his seriousness; instead, desperate panic gripped her.

"I will cry out to your men," she defied, catching the hint conveyed in his last speech. "I am an American, a woman—I cannot be treated so. They must help me!"

"I spoke for you, not myself," he corrected. "For me, there is nothing these men would not do."

"And you? Will you wage your feuds against a girl who knows nothing of them? What wrong have I done you in loving your brother? Count Balsic—" abruptly she stretched out both hands to him in appeal, utterly frank. "I have run away from my own people and journeyed alone to find Michael, who is wounded and ill. You see, I cannot go back except as his wife. You know—what would be said of me—of any girl. Let me go on. We will leave this country; I dare promise so much in Michael's name. He will never trouble you again, or be in your way. Oh!" in sharp reproach, "have you not yet made him suffer enough?"

It seemed to her that he went paler, with a

gray pallor of steel that only hardened the resolution of his face.

"For the last, let him look on his hearth for his wife, as I once looked for a woman; and find the place empty. For you, I will say that if you could be happy with Michael Balsic, I would send you to him and endure the consequences. As it is, I will not do you so poor a service as to send you to a man who has all the faults of Montenegro and all the vices of Paris. You know nothing of the wretchedness you would marry."

"He loves me!" she flamed.

"He has loved many, mademoiselle."

She faltered, then as his meaning reached her, wrath and contempt blazed up in her eyes.

"You can say that? You? Count Balsic, I saw the Frenchwoman leave your car at Antivari!"

His gray glance pierced her, before his lip bent in a singular smile. As if decided, he reined back his horse and spoke to his own men, then to hers.

There was a movement of the group. Danilo Lesendra rode forward. Delight saw her driver and his companion dismount sullenly from the box of the carriage, returning dangerous glances to the silent menace of the other men, who held ready hands on the pistols at their belts. Here, as in Western America, life not seldom depended on whose gun was first drawn. Two of Stefan Balsic's followers swung into the vacated seats.

The last action struck Delight with full realization of her captivity. Twisting the handle with fingers become clumsy, she dragged the door open with the frantic thought of making her escape among the rocks where the horses could not follow. Before she could spring to the ground, Lesendra checked her, with all respect.

"Believe me, mademoiselle, that would be worst of all," he said soberly.

Panting, she studied his fair, inflexible face, where now she saw his kinship to Michael.

"Let me go," she begged, clasping his arm. "Captain Lesendra, help me go. I will go away from Montenegro—I will never come back."

He shook his head, with the regretful patience of one denying a child. And like a child, the girl flung herself away from him, calling out in utter unreason.

"Rupert!" she called. "Rupert! Rupert!"

The clear, frail voice was shattered along the desolate Karst as a brook dashes itself among rocks and is lost. Rupert was many miles away, lingering in Antivari. Disheartened, Delight fell upon the seat and dropped her head in her hands.

She felt the carriage start, but she did not look up. She recognized herself helpless; confronted by one thing the American girl cannot comprehend because the American man does not use it against her: force. With each mile her rage and in-

credulity grew, blotting out fear, hate, even the desire for Michael.

When she looked up, black night had struck light from sky and earth as absolutely as though day were unknown. Delight could not see the driver of the carriage, or those riders whom she heard all about her. They seemed to have no need of vision, though on a road where a misstep meant death. Occasionally a spark would leap beneath an iron-shod hoof, or a yellow ray would shine dimly from some peasant's window, leaving the darkness darker with its passing. Even such gleams were rare.

They traveled at a moderate rate. But the speed was too great for Delight to carry out her vague project of slipping from the carriage and hiding among the rocks until dawn. Surely next morning she could bribe some of the mountaineers to take her to Michael Balsic. They would recognize his name; at least carry a message to him. She settled herself to watch, in ambush for an opportunity.

There are few things more trying to nerves unaccustomed than continued darkness. Hour after hour it taught Delight Warren suspense, exasperation, finally dread. In all her life she had never experienced an hour's loneliness until she started on this journey; now she was alone as few women have ever been. Her healthy young imagination

began to play tricks, as fatigue and strain told. All the stories she had been told of Stefan Balsic came back and painted their scenes upon the black walls about her.

They were all stories of his dealing with men; she could recall nothing to point out what a girl in his hands might expect.

There was one of the yellow rays ahead. Delight fixed her eyes, aching with blankness, upon its welcome relief. It grew nearer, took the shape of a pointed window—with a shock that brought her upright, she realized the cavalcade was stopping.

The party stopped entirely. Presently a door, pointed at the top like the window, swung open, and she saw Count Balsic ride forward into the light. The carriage was still in obscurity. Driven by sudden, wild conviction that this was the house of Stefan Balsic, Delight noiselessly turned the door-handle and slipped down to the road.

The sweet breath of a horse was on her cheek, she felt its soft nose brush her shoulder and guessed by instinct that she stood beside Danilo Lesendra. She gave the horse a bare caressing touch, and stole past it. The next instant her hand touched rock and she knew that she was at the side of the road. The bank ascended, not too sharply. Up she fled, touched an angle and rounded it. Instantly she was wrapped in darkness.

Jagged edges caught and tugged at her light dress, releasing her at the cost of tearing fabric. Round stones rolled under her tread, crevices snatched and detained her small, flying feet. She threw away her wide hat as an encumbrance, and heard it glide down a slope, starting a miniature avalanche of loose stone that finally ended in a splashing sound far below.

The evidence of how near some brink she stood sobered and steadied her. She stopped involuntarily. Obviously it was not safe to go on until dawn, yet some distance she must put between herself and her late captors. Listening, she could hear no sounds of a pursuit. The stillness and black desolation were like tangible walls pressing in on her. Perhaps the party would ride on without discovering the carriage was empty.

She stood still for many moments, leaning against a great boulder. The eagerness of escape was gone; she was trembling with weariness and sick discouragement. It loomed impossible to find her way, still more impossible to find Michael among these huge deserts. The night chill struck to her heart. Then, while she leaned there, the girl heard something move.

It moved stealthily, and then was still. Was it lurking for her? Was it wild animal, or wild man? She knew nothing of the people of this country, but she remembered Danilo Lesendra's

grave warning when she essayed flight. That would be worst of all, he had said. Michael once had spoken of bears and wolves. She forced herself closer to the rock, as if seeking protection from its granite surface.

The waiting grew worse and worse; unbearable. When suspense ceased to be a respite, Delight turned her back to the direction from which she had heard the fall and splash, and sprang forward in blind flight.

Not far. She was caught in the arms of someone who rose out of the darkness, caught, and held. Frantic, the girl struggled, striving to wrench herself free.

"Help!" she cried, fear of Count Balsic's men lost in this new terror. "Help! Let me go! Do not touch me."

"Hush," bade a strong, quiet voice. "You are in no danger, mademoiselle."

Delight was still at once. Utterly spent, she lay in the arms of Stefan Balsic, nervous tremors shaking her in wavelike succession. Presently he spoke again, without anger or passion:

"You have no cause for this fear. Michael lies under an accusation that makes it impossible for him to possess you and your gifts until he is either cleared or convicted. Until then, I shall keep you in my house; and because only so can you stay there with honor, I make you my wife.

The marriage can be annulled in your America, on your return. You have my word to set you free at the first moment safe."

"Why are you holding me," she gasped. "Why do you touch me?"

In reply he struck a wax match and held it out, still keeping one arm about her. Delight looked, and shrank, awed and ashamed of her own suspicion. They were standing on a narrow promontory, a neck of rock projecting over an abyss. The sheer verge was on three sides of them. She had been running toward death when he stopped her. The match burned out.

"Remember that you gave me the little dog, mademoiselle," said Stefan Balsic, through the dark.

She did remember it; and the face she had just seen in the match-light was the one that had moved her to that absurd, impulsive confidence.

"Let me go back," she whispered. "I will not marry him until you say I may. I will wait."

"Would you keep that promise," he asked, "when Michael joined you in New York and told you I had lied?"

Delight Warren was honest. She found no answer. After a moment he turned and led her back. The girl went without resistance; she had had enough of the Karst, alone.

When the yellow door and window were again

bright against the gloom, her companion paused.

"We are near the Orient," he said. "No women are more chaste than ours, but no conventions more strict. I would not do you so much wrong as to take you to my house except as my wife; do not compel me to it. Lay aside all thoughts of escape or rescue. I know where we stand, and I tell you there is no such chance. This building is a church; a priest is waiting."

"Where?" she panted, aroused to hope. "Take me to him!"

He looked at her with an understanding compassionate rather than hard, and brought her across the threshold of the poor little edifice, closing the door behind them. A white-haired, white-bearded man moved forward in the light that, dim as it was, dazzled the girl who had been so long in the dark. With an eager cry, Delight sprang past the man with her and ran to the other, grasping his robe with small, tenacious fingers. Not of his church, all her convent education nevertheless showed him to her as a refuge.

"My father, you will help me? You will not permit this thing—this crime? Oh, if you cannot understand my language, you can see I ask your protection! Let me stay with you—anywhere, anyhow. I will make your church rich; only keep me here."

Her wide eyes besought him; she broke off, ex-

pectant. The old man met her gaze with a smile of embarrassment, moving uneasily. To Count Balsic he looked with habitual dependence on the master's guidance.

"Will you not help me?" she reproached. "Oh God—will you let this be done—you, a priest?"

The appeal brought only a puzzled shake of the head. The old man murmured a soothing phrase, running his fingers through his flowing beard.

"What have you told him?" the girl demanded fiercely, facing her captor.

Stefan Balsic met her look.

"Are you convinced, mademoiselle? You are no more in these men's eyes than a disobedient child, dangerous in your ignorance. You must come; by the sheltered way I offer, or—"

"Like the woman in the car!" she finished hysterically, and broke into passionate sobbing. "Like the woman in the car!"

He caught her as she swayed, her hands over her face. He said nothing, waiting.

"Will you let me go, as you said?" she asked faintly, after a time. "Will you let me go to Michael, by and by?"

"I have given you my word. Even Michael will admit that has never been broken."

"The Frenchwoman—had marks—on her face."

The curious smile again bent his lip, not to mirth.

"My wife will have nothing to fear, from me or any other man."

She was silent. Presently he drew her forward.

It was a strange, unreal marriage. The girl rested against the arm whose touch she hated, only semi-conscious, passive from exhaustion. Stefan Balsic made the necessary responses in the language of the Greek Church, and guided his companion through the ceremony meaningless to her. The placing of the ring upon her finger was the one form she understood. Danilo Lesendra had entered, at the beginning; at the end he came forward, bowed profoundly over Delight's hand, then held the door open. The three went out.

When the girl was seated in the carriage, Count Balsic did not turn to his horse, held for him by one of his statuesque men.

"Until you learn to view us more justly, I dare not leave you alone in this darkness," he said. "I must ride with you, madame, for the journey that is left."

She had surrendered too utterly to dispute now. Yet, to feel him beside her—

"Not you," she partly rebelled. "Send Captain Lesendra. Not you!"

He drew back at once, with a word of command to his kinsman. That young officer threw the

bridle of his horse to one of the men, saluted the girl, and took the place opposite her. A moment later, they were again traveling along the unseen road.

The precaution of guarding Delight from herself was not necessary. Numbness had overtaken her; resistance was worn out. It might not have been so if her husband had insisted on riding with her, but there was nothing to arouse her fear or antagonism in the presence of Danilo Lesendra. She lay still, with closed eyes. But once her escort leaned forward and dropped the fleecy warmth of some wrap about her shoulders.

"Permit me, madame," he apologized. "The night is cold, and your dress thin."

Instead of resenting the service, she caught the hand that had touched her.

"What will happen to me?" she questioned, her voice breaking. "You know him—what will happen to me?"

"Nothing," he answered gently. "Nothing but good. This violence to-night was forced on us by your coming here. We thought all safe while Michael was unable to go to you. We had not counted on your coming to him, unafraid."

"You were watching for me, this morning."

"I beg your pardon. I was there on another errand, and guessed all when I saw you."

"You knew me—how?"

"I had seen you in Tours. And this morning I acted on my own responsibility."

"What would you have done with me, if I had entered your limousine?"

"I would have driven aboard the boat that was leaving, and taken you back to Italy, madame. When you refused, I rode back to Count Balsic."

"But why? Why? How can you be so cruel to a girl because you hate Michael?"

"It is no cruelty that keeps you from Michael Balsic," corrected Lesendra very curtly, and said no more.

She mused dully on this hatred of Michael, until lights again shone out of the obscurity. The journey was ended.

Montenegro is a country of simplicity. A country neither to be bought nor conquered, its luxury has been its freedom, its treasury an armory. Wealth is not generally known or coveted. In all the land there was no such house as that of Stefan Balsic, with the possible exception of some Russian State Buildings designed to impress the smaller nation. It was one of those Turkish castles snatched from the Moslem in the youth of Prince Nicholas; rebuilt and preserved by Count Balsic's mother with the sovereign's special permission.

But Delight was not of this country. When Danilo Lesendra assisted her to leave the carriage, the girl looked around the courtyard filled with

gigantic horsemen, up at the gray castle that loomed rather fortress than home, twin rock with the mountain to which it clung, and saw only a prison. She did not know she had staggered, until she found herself again leaning on Stefan Balsic and across the threshold of his house.

Her dazzled eyes received a kaleidoscopic impression of color and light, of rooms successively passed; then they entered a low, horseshoe-arched door.

"These were my mother's chosen rooms," said Count Balsic. "I give them to you."

She steadied herself, catching the back of a curious chair inlaid with dull mosaic. The taste of the luxury-loving Russian was evident in all about her, and a still richer fancy had been learned from the nearby East. Blue was the predominant color, running through all tints of pale and dark in hangings, rugs and cushions; touched with silver and gold, with bronze and copper. The room was octagonal, lighted with tall, standing lamps. But what the girl saw most clearly by their glow was the massive door that had closed behind her.

"Please go away," she articulated. "Please go."

He looked at her with the penetrating comprehension that left her no secrets.

"You are in a tower with but one door of communication with my house, madame." He held

out his hand. "Here is the key to the door. My servants will bring what you desire. To-morrow we will arrange better for your comfort. To-night, if you have confidence in no one else and wish anything the castle can give, send for Danilo."

He had reached the door when her voice halted him.

"Is there no woman in this place? None? Not even a peasant?"

He hesitated.

"Yes," he slowly replied. "There is one."

"You will let her come to me? You will? Oh—" suddenly stricken, she paused, red flushing through the pallor of exhaustion.

"You are wrong," he answered her thought. "I will have her awakened. Wait."

There was a divan that circled all the room. On it Delight threw herself and hid her face among the pillows. For the moment, it was enough to be alone and no longer in the black night. She thought of Michael, of Jack Rupert and her uncle and aunt, but dully, as of people long since passed out of her life. Life? Was she herself alive? Would there be no awakening from this wild fantasy in which she seemed to move?

Long afterward, she heard the tinkling of the silver-tasselled curtains, and started up from a state between stupor and sleep. Something hard was pressed in her shut hand; it was the key, and

she had forgotten to lock the door. Dazed, she turned that way.

A girl-child was standing in the room, a girl of perhaps sixteen years; dressed with the extravagant brilliancy of the country in a scarlet petticoat, bodice of fine white linen, and graceful sleeveless coat of pale-blue cloth embroidered lavishly with silver. But in all she had seen of Montenegro the American had met no type like this. Unmarred by labor, she stood with the magnificent poise of the men; her round young breast swelled against the sheer linen, her skin had the color and smoothness of cream. Enchantingly irregular, the face she lifted was broad of brow and exceedingly delicate of chin; taken with her long, slightly Oriental eyes of dark-blue, the effect was daintily kitten-like. Over each shoulder a broad braid of wheat-yellow hair fell to her knees.

The two girls regarded each other with equal wonder and curiosity.

"Who are you?" Delight demanded, almost brusquely; essaying French on the faint chance of being understood. The undercurrent of thought in her mind set toward the Frenchwoman who had left Stefan Balsic's car at Antivari's port.

The answer came in English, quaint, but pure:

"Madame, I am Irenya Lesendra."

"Captain Lesendra's sister?" The exclamation was a cry of relief.

"His second cousin, madame. Some day we are to be married."

"To be married? You love him?" the American crossed the room, catching the other's hands, her brown eyes searching the blue ones. "Oh then, help me a little! I am married to a man I hate, a man I have seen but once before to-night. Think of it, and help me; think if it happened to yourself!"

The girl drew back, her glance bewildered and grave.

"I am here to help madame. But many of our women marry husbands they have never seen. She whom Lord Stefan takes for his wife is honored. And she who is his enemy will find no friends in his house."

"But I love another man!" Delight gave challenge and defense. "I was on my way to marry Lieutenant Michael Balsic."

Silence followed. The girl studied the stranger as if uncertain of having heard aright.

"Michael Balsic? You would marry Michael Balsic? You wish to marry him?"

Checked and angry, Delight stared in her turn.

"Why not? What do you mean?"

Irenya shrugged, and smiled with a demure wisdom that made the kitten-look still more pronounced.

"Let me bring supper. You are tired, Countess —I do not know madame's name."

The strange title brought back the American's fear and rebellion.

"I will not eat or sleep in this place," she stormed with abrupt passion. "Tell him so—tell him I will not stay here; I will not!"

"Tell—who, madame?"

"Count Balsic."

The girl regarded her with something near consternation.

"One does not send such messages to Lord Stefan," she rebuked. "But he is not in the castle; he has ridden out."

"Out?"

"Until dawn, or longer, Countess."

That information stilled Stefan Balsic's prisoner. She sank passively into the chair Irenya advanced. The girl left the room, and returned with a tray.

There was a shy, half-proud offer of friendship in the care with which Irenya set forth the supper and invited her guest to eat. Delight responded with the gratitude of loneliness; the girl's soft courtesy and youth making her ashamed of her own churlishness. There was a security, too, in the companionship of Danilo Lesendra's betrothed and Stefan Balsic's kinswoman, that soothed and quieted her to reasonableness.

When the meal was ended, Irenya diffidently suggested the toilette.

"Madame will wish to bathe and sleep; her pretty dress is spoiled."

With the speech, she drew aside a curtain from the door of an adjoining room. Following her, Delight found herself in a bedchamber, and confronted by a full-length mirror into which stepped her own reflection. She stopped short, gazing. Was that Delight Warren, that white girl whose wide eyes were dark-circled by fatigue, whose hair tumbled wind-tossed about her face and shoulders? Her linen frock was torn and stained by her flight among the rocks, her hands bruised and scratched.

"That is the Russian mirror of the Princess," Irenya's voice was in her ears. "Old—it is very old. All the way from Moscow it was brought, because it is the luck-bringer of her race. It is called the silver mirror; all of silver is the frame, see! And, and they say strange things have been seen in it."

Stranger than her own image in this place, Delight wondered bitterly? But she could not continue in this condition, nor plan escape while thus exhausted. She turned away, sullenly yielding to Irenya's ministrations. After all, to-morrow would do.

CHAPTER V

The House of Stefan Balsic

Day stole sun-sandalled into the strange room where the American lay asleep. For Delight had slept, almost from the moment Irenya had bestowed her in the canopied bed. Healthy, weary youth does not easily keep vigil; and there was no spur to wakefulness. Irenya had locked the door of the tower and readily consented to remain all night.

But with the brightening morning Delight awoke. Starting to her elbow, she looked about her, at first anxiously, then reassured by the placid repose of the place. On the broad couch opposite Irenya was sleeping with the relaxed abandon and rose-flushed prettiness of childhood, one of the yellow braids lying about her throat in a gold collar reminiscent of Porphyria's fate. A warm breeze was coquetting with all things that could be made to dance and stir under its soft pressure, so that the air was fresh and very pure, as mountain air is apt to be.

After a while, Delight rose quietly, wrapped herself in a negligée Irenya had unpacked the night before, and crossed to a window. She wanted to

see this country into which she had been brought; see it alone and herself unwatched.

But she nearly frustrated her purpose by the exclamation forced from her, as she looked. Was this the nightmare desert of rock and blackness, this?

The house of Stefan Balsic was set high, yet the mountains rose far above. On every side the huge hills towered and billowed away, so that the castle was like a tiny boat set among the waves of a sea immeasurably vast. The resemblance was enhanced by the barren, corrugated surface of the land, from which the sunlight glanced back as from gray glass. But below on one side lay the plain, at this distance bright-hued and dainty as a garden, where miniature white houses clustered amid vivid green. Beyond still farther, the lofty Albanian mountain-range ran like a forbidding wall dark in the blue clearness of the morning. And between the two lands of hereditary enmity, the American glimpsed Lake Scutari shining like one of those coveted jewels for whose possession men plot and die; as they have for this water-jewel, and do still.

Winding across the Karst ran a road; the road Delight had traveled the last night. She studied it, now, wondering in which direction lay Michael's home. She was certain that she had been carried much deeper into Montenegro than her journey to

him would have taken her. Oh, why had she not waited, as her guardians had wished? How trivial now seemed the separation of an ocean voyage! Had she been mad, the night before, that she had consented to a marriage which left her helpless in the hands of Michael's enemy and her own? She felt anger with herself run over her body like actual heat.

The courtyard of the once-Turkish castle lay below and to the right of the tower. As Delight leaned at the window, her attention was brought to the enclosure by a movement and stir. A man ran across to the gate; Danilo Lesendra emerged from a doorway. A moment later, Count Balsic and four of his men rode into the court.

The girl drew back into the shelter of the curtains, watching the man she had married. Was this indeed the supposed Parisian she had met in France, this strange noble surrounded by his gigantic followers?

While she looked, one of the mountaineers in the courtyard leaned his rifle against the wall, approached the master with a few words apparently of explanation, and kissed Count Balsic's hand with natural simplicity. The action was not servile, but of a quaint dignity that honored both. It struck the American with a sudden coldness of realization of the new forces among which she had stepped, and what it meant to challenge Stefan

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Balsic on his own soil. How *had* she challenged him? Amazement swept back across her mind, levelling all other emotions. Why had he risked so much to keep her from Michael; why?

Irenya had awakened and was smoothing herself, once more kittenlike. Her blue-black eyes smiled greeting at the girl who impulsively turned from the window.

"Irenya, I will dress," Delight announced, imperiously abrupt. "And have word sent to Count Balsic that I will see him."

Scandalized at the outrage against every rule of etiquette and custom taught her, Irenya faltered. Quite ignorant of the effect of her message, Delight was already before the silver mirror of the Russian, shaking her auburn hair over her shoulders in preparation for its arrangement.

"You—will see him, madame?"

"Yes. But I must make ready, first. Will you take out my things?"

Irenya shrugged with a resignation caught from the East, and complied. For the rest, she delighted in handling the American's possessions.

Stefan Balsic answered the summons with that promptness which is a courtesy in itself. While Delight was awaiting Irenya's return with a reply to her message, the Montenegrin girl opened the door, silently ushered in the visitor, and retired.

It had suited Delight to remove all possible signs

of the terrified, vanquished captive this man had brought home the night before. She could not recognize herself in that girl; she did not mean that he should. But when he was before her, she lost assurance, and to regain it spoke first.

"You were right: I have not been able to escape," she conceded bitterly. "Now, I should like to know what you propose to do with me?"

"I believed we had arranged that, last night," he returned. "But you were disturbed; perhaps it is not surprising you have forgotten."

"I have not forgotten! But I—" she arrested the retort.

"I would not say it," he approved. "It is best that we retain friendship."

Meeting the quiet eyes of Stefan Balsic, Delight had no inclination to tell him she doubted his word. But the last phrase startled her. Retain friendship? Had it ever existed between them?

"The word alarms you?" he added, with his brief smile. "I am older than you, madame; the word was right. Whether it continues so is a secret of the future."

"After—everything?"

"After anything. We scant neither love nor hate in the mountains."

"No; you took me from hate," she made swift reproach.

"You are mistaken."

"Not from——"

"Certainly not from love. Not being a romanticist, I should not find love an excuse for wrong, but an aggravation of it."

She fancied there was a tinge of irony in his accent, and scarlet flared into her face.

"You admit it a wrong," she flashed back. "Why then did you do this? Why? You accused your brother of some crime. What is it to you if I am willing to be his wife and chance good or evil with him? Why have I not the right to trust him, if I choose?"

They had been standing on either side of the long center-table; now he moved aside and placed a chair for the girl.

"Will you be seated, madame? I have ridden for twenty hours with slight intermission. You are, as I once told you, strong of will; I will try to make you understand."

"I was a coward last night! A coward to marry under force!"

"You were very wise."

She paused, her hand on the back of the chair she was about to take.

"What would you have done?" she asked curiously. "If I had refused, what would you have done?"

He made a gesture that put the question aside. Before his attitude of waiting, Delight took the

seat he had indicated. She saw, as he seated himself opposite her, that his white-leather riding-boots were discolored by dust, and that the same gray dust lay thickly in the gold embroidery of his uniform. Where had he been, she wondered, after he brought her home? There was a weariness not physical in his clear-cut face; a face too powerful for beauty in the eyes of the girl who loved the debonair Michael.

"Madame, you are an American," he began, indirectly and with a reluctance almost brusque. "Suppose you had been a kinswoman of that Benedict Arnold who betrayed your hero Washington: would you have suffered his treason to go on?"

"No."

"Montenegro's liberty has been more hardly kept than your country's. Not for one war or one generation, but for five centuries. Year after year Europe has dashed its waves against the foot of the Black Mountain, falling back from each assault. Turkey, Albania, France, Austria—our people have fought against each; against enormous odds, against famine, craft and temptation; but never yet against treachery from each other. That first and last disgrace has been reserved for my house."

The girl uttered a faint cry.

"Yours?"

"It is so. While Montenegro is drawing her first quiet breath in the first peace she has known, Michael Balsic is planning to sell her to Austria."

Delight sprang to her feet, storm sweeping her face. Even his warning of the previous night had not prepared her for this.

"I do not believe you," she flung her challenge. "It is not true. You always hated him, always!"

"Do you suppose I would foul my own name with that shame for any object?" he retorted, cold as she was hot. "Do you suppose it is pleasant or easy for me even to voice it to you, a stranger from an honorable nation?"

"But—"

"It is so."

There was no questioning that finality. If she did not believe the fact, Delight was compelled to believe Stefan Balsic's sincerity. Nor could she meet that stern frankness with insult. After a moment, she sat down; her brown eyes still afire behind their heavy lashes, her small head proudly poised.

"Even though you think this of your brother, I fail to understand my part in it," she said. "Once more, why am I here?"

He answered her bluntly.

"Because Michael shall not have your money to corrupt men to his purposes. In you is embodied menace."

"If he were what you say, Austria would give him money."

"Austria has. But Michael has a burning thirst for those pleasures which have brought him notice even in unnoticing Paris and Vienna; he has spent money without result, and the Austrians will stake little more on a game so uncertain. But Michael is ambitious; he will gamble with your money for high place under a foreign king."

"How, with my money? Please remember, I do not believe him guilty."

"You are a good friend," he commended, gray eyes resting on her with a grave compassion more trying to her faith than any argument he could advance. "How? Montenegro, in danger and at war, could not be corrupted. At peace, her men are soldiers in idleness who have not yet found occupation; and the trickling poison of socialism is being poured among them. Oh, they are loyal to the king, yet! They would shoot down the man who proposed treason. But they listen to socialism —over glasses of brandy—and it gnaws and weakens the fabric like acid. King Nikolas cannot live forever. Austria covets what she cannot conquer."

"Michael—?"

"Desires power and place. Our people are poor; your wealth would be an assassin's dagger in his hand. That weapon he shall not have."

"So you take it?"

She repented the taunt before it was finished. But the barb fell short.

"If I were at starvation, your money could buy me nothing," he answered, never more calmly. "It is to me only a danger guarded against. Nor are you to me a beautiful woman, but a hostage for my country's peace."

Deeply stung, yet checked by the stately bearing and glance of the man who wrested respect from her against her will, Delight rose and crossed to the window. She felt as if her heart rushed out across the wide, strange landscape, seeking Michael with pity and defiant protection. Samson-like, Stefan Balsic had stepped into the temple she had reared, and was shaking its columns. But a woman's faith is a stronger pillar than those of Gaza; she dreaded no downfall, proudly unafraid.

"You said last night that you were not sure of what you accuse," she recalled, presently. "You said that I would be free, after he was either cleared or—"

"I beg your pardon; I did not say that I was not sure," he corrected. "I would be more happy than you if I could say it. But I did give you my promise that you should be free when I held proof of his guilt—or innocence, if that were possible."

"Why did you not warn me, if you believed this, in Tours?"

She still kept her back to him, yet felt that he smiled with the compassion that so chafed her in his glance.

"Would you have listened to a stranger met on the street, madame, when you would not heed your uncle and aunt, your guardians? And if I had told you my name, would you have believed Stefan Balsic's evidence against Michael? It was my intention that your fiancé should never leave this country to join you until this matter was settled."

It was true, and Delight knew it. But the fact did not lessen her anger, nor her growing fear for Michael. What justice would he meet, if brought to trial? What if he were entangled in some net of circumstance's weaving, perhaps chance, aided by his own gay imprudence, and could lay hands on no proof that would satisfy these stern men who held life at so low a value?

"You have accused him to the King?" she asked, holding her voice to steadiness.

"Hardly! Do you imagine I desire disgrace, or choose to be my brother's executioner? Yes," as she shrank. "If the King had my knowledge, Michael Balsic would not live twenty-four hours."

"You hate him!"

"What do you think me?" he asked curiously. And when she made no answer: "There is no one who knows of this except Danilo Lesendra and

myself; and now, you. Remember that if you repeat what you have heard, you will hurt me, but you will kill Michael."

"What—if you should hold the proof, what would you do?" With the question, she turned to face him.

"When I hold in my hands tangible evidence that will make it death for Michael to enter the country he has wronged, I will send him out; safe and free to live as he will, so that he never again crosses Montenegrin borders. Then you may marry him if you choose, madame. In America your divorce from me will be easily obtained."

The girl flushed deeply; fancying she divined contempt beneath the calm level of his speech.

"If he were what you say, I should never marry him, Count Balsic. But he is not. I do not wish to stay in your house; let me go to my own country until you have finished your investigation of your unfortunate brother's morals. I will wait."

"I am sorry to refuse," he slowly regretted. "You would be like no woman I have known if you kept the promise to wait, after your lover told you I had lied. You would believe him."

"No!" Delight contradicted, through shut teeth.

"No?"

"No. You are not a liar—you are a fanatic."

To her dismay, she felt actual tears of passion

heavy on her lashes, and turned quickly away with the last word.

"Granted," conceded Stefan Balsic. "Thank you, madame."

The silence that followed was long. Resistance had gone out of the girl, and with it the hope, almost the desire of escape. After all, since she could not go to Michael, did it matter where she stayed?

Count Balsic ended the interview, crossing to her side.

"Before I leave you, madame," he said, "will you live as my prisoner or my guest?"

Astonished, she looked up at him.

"I do not understand."

"It is simple. Must I have you watched, or will you give me your parole?"

"You would trust me?"

"Yes."

Moved more than she herself could comprehend, oddly comforted by the knowledge this man rated her so high, Delight lifted her head with impulsive decision.

"I give it. I will not run away, Count Balsic. And—you are wrong, wrong, but I do trust your promise to me."

His gray eyes and her brown met in a long regard; and each one knew there were certain things never to be feared from the other.

CHAPTER VI

Mr. Rupert of New York

After the first day, Delight Balsic's life fell into order, even into that routine without which civilized man or woman feels vaguely at loss and disreputable. Irenya was her constant and adoring companion; bringing her morning coffee, playing maid to her toilet, amusing her with tales and songs. There were other women in the castle, wives of the soldiers and patiently serving as menials, the American girl soon discovered. They seemed happy, if dull.

"They are not to be near you, Countess Délice," Irenya loftily informed her charge; the two girls had compromised on that title as least trying to both. "They are peasants. You are like the Princess; fine and delicate. *I* will attend you."

Delight smiled her thanks. Already she had heard much of this Russian lady who was the mother of Stefan and Michael Balsic. The princess, it seemed, had left an impression even on the Montenegrin indifference to women, by her flaxen-haired, fair-skinned beauty, the great dowry she brought, and above all by her nationality. For Russia has been kind to the Land of the Black

Mountain, and the people return a gratitude hot as their hate. Some of Stefan Balsic's influence, the American discovered, was due to his Russian blood and power at the Russian court.

"The Princess loved Count Balsic," the American slowly observed, groping for a solution of the problem of Stefan Balsic's wealth and Michael's poverty.

"Certainly; but she died while he was very young. Everyone honors Lord Stefan. He—" Irenya leaned nearer, dropping the embroidery she held and lowering her voice confidentially, "he works with the King. When King Nikolas would have guns, or those automobile stages which carry passengers from town to town, or anything which demands money, much money, he sends for Lord Stefan. He loves my lord, as my lord loves him. Once—I will tell you that story, Countess Délice! Once an Albanian went mad, in the market at Podgoritza, and would have stabbed the King from behind. Lord Stefan saw just in time to fling himself between and catch the blow. The knife went deep, deep, before those near could shoot the man; deep across Lord Stefan's arm and into his breast, so that they said he would surely die. Long he lay ill of that wound, from a spring to an autumn. When Lord Stefan bares his breast, you will see that scar."

"Irenya!" Delight rebuked, scarlet, and

sprang up to lean on the stone railing of the balcony upon which they were established.

But she was beginning to understand the man she had married. Small wonder he had not been turned aside from his stern guard of honor by her tears and protests! What place had the pretty fancies of chivalry, the service of ladies and troubadour romance of the South, in this land of naked cliffs and naked war? She had called him a fanatic. Well, only a patriotism that was a faith could have maintained Crnagora's defense against five hundred years of attack. Not although she summoned Michael's fair, handsome image to remind her of lost happiness could she compel actual hate of Stefan Balsic.

She had been four days in the castle, now. For the last three, the castle's master had been away. Danilo Lesendra was in command, but Delight had not seen him except at a distance. Recollections of that night drive when she had clung to him, the morning at Antivari when she had insulted him before Jack Rupert, were reared barrierlike between her and the young officer; at least, in her fancy. Less and less could she account for the Frenchwoman, as she learned more of this austere life; the memory of the woman's bruised cheek lay in her mind as a boding warning of how little she knew what was beneath the smooth surface of the castle's household.

"Irenya, who are you?" she abruptly demanded, breaking the long pause.

Irenya again laid down the embroidery upon which she had been placidly engaged during the interval.

"I am Irenya Ivanovna Lesendra," she explained simply, lifting her pointed chin and half closing her drowsy blue eyes to assist concentration. "When the Princess came from Russia she brought with her two young, dowerless kinswomen; orphan sisters who waited upon her as I do upon you, Countess Délice. When the Princess died ten years later, these two married two cousins of old Count Balsic, named Lesendra. From one marriage came Danilo; from the other, much later, I."

"And have you no one of your family left, my poor Irenya?"

"Oh yes! There is Lord Stefan."

"But your parents?"

"Oh! My father and Danilo's fell the same day, against a band of raiders from the Prokletze. I was born afterward, when my mother died."

Delight gazed in silence at the child of tragedy; who pursed her dimpled mouth over a knotted thread, and resumed her sewing. If Irenya was an illustration of Stefan Balsic's guardianship, his new ward had no cause for unease. Yet—

"Irenya," she spoke carefully, choosing her words in view of sixteen years and innocence, "did

there live—I mean, was there here a Frenchwoman, before I came?"

"Certainly. She had wonderful clothes like your own, Countess Délice, only," Irenya considered, "only more gay. But I do not know her name. My lord forbade me to speak to her or approach her. Why, I did not know."

But Delight knew; and remembered how Danilo Lesendra had contemptuously dismissed the woman from her own presence. Yet Stefan Balsic dared criticize Michael's "dissipations"! She did not believe in them; she did not believe any evil of the man she loved. Indignant, with an unanalyzed sense of soreness and disappointment, she looked out across the blue, sun-gilt spaces between her and the distant plain of Zeta.

A wide-winged golden eagle drifted down past the gray mountains. Following its flight, Delight's gaze fell on a moving speck upon the road that twisted painfully up the sullen Karst. The speck moved fast, very fast; almost as swiftly as the circling bird. While she looked, the hot sunlight struck it and flashed back as from a heliograph.

"Irenya, do the King's motor-buses run here?"

"No, Countess Délice. Some day, perhaps; not yet."

Delight lapsed into silence; her eyes, topaz-fired by excitement, fixed on the two flying things that seemed akin, the gleaming-plumaged eagle and

the flashing car. When hope became certainty, she spoke:

"There is an automobile coming up the mountains, Irenya."

"The King!" the Montenegrin girl drew instant deduction, and ran to Delight's side scattering skeins of silk and gold thread in her haste.

"Why?"

"There are no automobiles except those of the King and Lord Stefan, Countess Délice. And my lord rode out where no automobile goes or could climb. Ah, how it flies! What pleasure to travel so!"

"Have you never motored?"

"I? But such things are for men! Or for great ladies, as those of the royal household and the King's daughter who is Queen of Italy, and you, Countess Délice."

Out of strong irritation Delight retorted.

"In my country, in all civilized countries, every good thing is for women. What men fight for, what they invent, what they gain, are all brought to their women. In any country but this," she ground her little heel savagely against the stone pavement, "your Count Stefan would not dare so much as to take my hand without permission, far less—"

She broke off, recalling dignity, and turned

her flushed face to the mountains. Irenya stared in pleased incredulity.

"In your land, women take all?"

"Yes,"—recklessly.

"They are stronger than the men?"

"No. But the men love them more than themselves, and give all to them."

"What land is that, Countess Délice?"

"America, and—" with a cry of triumphant gladness, "here is an American!"

The motor-car had swept around an angle into plain view; brave in silver-gray enamel, in glitter of metal and glint of glass. At its steering-wheel was a small figure; a man who guided the machine with one hand and with the other shaded his eyes, looking up at the castle that was so rare a sight in this land of simplicity. Delight dragged free the white scarf about her shoulders and flung it out like a banner, leaning dangerously far across the rail.

The scarf streamed on the light wind, conspicuous against the dull stone walls. Almost at once the signal brought the motorist's glance to where the girl leaned, the sun shining on her copper-bronze little head as it had on the golden bird. He raised his cap, then waved it in answer to the waving scarf. Exultant, Delight drew in her flag and turned.

Irenya was looking at her, red mouth com-

pressed, fair brows knit with an expression of severity strange enough on her girl's face.

"Why did you do that, Countess Délice?" she demanded, her voice low.

"Why do you question me?" countered the other, surprised and resentful.

"Because we of Lord Stefan's house are loyal to him. Are you?"

The challenge was unexpected. Delight stood quite still, the scarf slipping from her fingers to the pavement at her feet. Now that Jack Rupert was here, what did she mean to do? Go with him? She had given her word to stay. Standing there in the hot Montenegrin sunlight, she remembered the story of her own grandfather; how during the Civil War he had been taken prisoner by a gentleman of South Carolina, and had given his parole to his captor. How that night a Northern cavalry regiment had passed by the thicket where the two men camped, while the Carolinian lay sleeping and John Warren looked on, honorably dumb when a shout would have brought him liberty and life. He had died in his Southern prison, that chivalrous officer, at the age of twenty-three. Delight Warren was the latest of his descendants.

The automobile was at the castle, now, but she did not go to meet it. Irenya retreated toward the door, troubled gaze upon the rebel. She did not

speak again, nor did Delight, until Irenya stepped between the curtains and was gone.

The automobile rolled into the courtyard, received with smiles and salutes, if with astonishment, by the men there. Already accustomed to the ready Montenegrin hospitality, Jack Rupert swung out of his seat, nodding to the half-dozen tall soldiers who clustered about with the pleased curiosity of children.

"Judging from who flagged me, I guess I'm calling on Mrs. Balsic," the American signified, leisurely drawing off his gauntlets as he passed a glance over the building. "Will you pass me into the fort on that name, or don't I flavor it right? Mrs. *Balsic?*"

The emphasized name evoked nods and smiles of recognition and reassurance, together with a phrase several times repeated in which the name was uttered. One of the men rested his rifle against a wall and brought a cup of coffee from a little table around which they had been seated, offering it to the guest. Rupert eyed the beverage without favor, but accepted.

"Thanks," he acknowledged discontentedly. "I've only drunk four like this since breakfast and refused five glasses of alcohol I wouldn't put in a cheap motor that belonged to my hated enemy. I ain't disparaging politeness, but it's overdone when

you're offered a drink every time you ask your way."

His hosts beamed and received the speech with cordial approbation. The seven-foot officer in charge returned an answer in which Rupert caught a familiar name, in his turn.

"Lesendra!" he echoed. "Captain Lesendra *here?* What?" meeting unmistakable signs that he had heard correctly. "Here? Well, lead me to him."

Naturally, he was not understood except as knowing Danilo Lesendra. But comprehending his gesture toward the castle, his host led him within; having just explained that Captain Lesendra was temporarily absent, the man inferred the foreigner wished to await that young officer.

The interior was refreshingly cool. Its Eastern richness and shaded light came as a relief to eyes weary of the strange, violent landscape. At the threshold the soldier halted, saluted Rupert with an evident placing before him of the entire castle, and withdrew. It was at the moment Rupert advanced into the hall that Irenya came through the arched door opposite.

Mutually fascinated, the two regarded each other. A bird of paradise alighting in his garage could have astounded the practical racing-driver no more than this girl, exotic as an almond-blossom and colored like one, with hair yellow as the

flower's pollen and falling in the braids of a Melisande. She was the final unreality of this unreal land.

Irenya's impressions were less bewildered and more definite. After the magnificent proportions of the men she knew, the New Yorker appeared almost effeminately small. He was so exactly her own height that their eyes met on a level, as they stood. No flatterer could have acclaimed as beautiful his intelligent, cynical, dark face; nor should the severe correctness of his motor-costume have appealed to one reared among the brilliant uniforms and colors of Montenegro. But of the man and girl, it was the girl who came close to what is called love at first sight. Irenya gave her verdict in the slow, characteristic lift of her head that tilted her little chin and displayed its dimple, the kitten-look of coquetry and allure in her drowsy, half-open blue eyes.

That movement ended a pause which had seemed likely to endure. Being masculine, Rupert had promptly answered the glance; although without any hope of being understood.

"If I ought to apologize for being here, I'm busy at it now," he spoke, with his slight drawl. But I was marched in by the army. I came to see Miss Warren, who I guess is Mrs. Lieutenant Balsic by this time."

"The Lady Countess Balsic awaits your ex-

cellency," came the demure reply. "Your excellency is welcome here."

It was as if the bird of paradise had uttered articulate speech. His black eyes lit with a gratification there was no mistaking; he took a step forward.

"You've dropped the checked flag in front of me," said Rupert with cordiality. "My race ends right here where English is spoken. My name is registered Jack Rupert, of New York, U. S. A.; and I'm glad to meet you."

"New York? Your city of gold, in America?"

"Well, New York's gold has rather settled in spots," he drily qualified. "But it's all right if you're one of the spots. And it's in America; the rest of America is just fringe around it."

"It is so large?"

"It's large, but ain't the biggest part of it. I didn't get your name when you mentioned it—"

"Your excellency is mistaken," with pleased seriousness. "I have not yet given that trifling information. I am Irenya Lesendra, a kinswoman of this house."

The puzzled expression with which he had heard Danilo Lesendra's name again crossed Rupert's face, but he asked no questions.

"Thank you, Miss Lesendra," he acknowledged, and stopped, considering her.

Irenya hesitated, then with sudden resolution drew aside a curtain and invited him to follow.

Delight was still on the balcony, upright beside the stone balustrade. But at sight of the visitor she sprang forward, holding out both hands to him.

"I knew you would come—I knew you would find me!" she welcomed fervently, her voice shaking. "Oh, I am so glad, so *glad!*"

"I didn't have any schedule, and I guess I was afraid of running into your camp too soon," he explained. "But I saw your signal, so came in with congratulations."

Delight gazed at him, dumb before the realization that he knew nothing of the event which had blotted out all other happenings for her. She had yet to tell him all that scorched her with humiliation and impotent wrath. In growing surprise at her attitude, and the undefined change in her vivid face for which young wifehood would not seem to account, Rupert mechanically filled the blank left by her silence.

"This place wasn't located exactly where I expected from what I heard in Cetinje. But down in the valley I met the Sultan of Turkey, over from the next county in a pair of dress pajamas and a green sash, and he pointed up to this armory and said 'Balsic.' At least, that was the interesting part of his remarks. I guess he gave the right address."

"But not the one you believe!" burst from the girl. "Rupert, Rupert, this is Stefan Balsic's house and I am Stefan Balsic's wife!"

It was not easy to stagger Jack Rupert's self-possession. But he stared at his late traveling-companion in the most absolute amazement of his life.

"You married the other one?"

"He forced me. Oh, the shame of it!" she sank upon the stone bench among Irenya's scattered silks, covering her face. "What must you think me? How can I make you see? He stole me from the road like one of their own women, a creature to be governed like a child. I remembered the Frenchwoman—I was afraid, and married him."

"He kidnapped you?"

"Yes."

After a moment, Rupert spoke in his usual matter-of-fact tones, but with metallic incisiveness.

"We're starting now. I ain't supposing there's anything here you'll wait to take."

Delight let fall her hands.

"Go—with you?"

"I don't see anyone else. And since we're going to set some new speed records over these roads where no one's likely to make more than one mistake, we'll need all our time."

His assumption that there was but one possible course to be followed, brought the girl to recog-

nition of how unfair a charge she had brought against Stefan Balsic. Unfair, because it stated only the worst, and implied still more.

"Wait! I gave my word to stay here," she temporized.

He looked at her, with a sardonic twist of lip and brow.

"I ain't specially untruthful, but a promise frightened out of a girl by a kidnapper don't strike me as one I'd sooner perish than break. I'm going ahead to start the motor; when the car's pointed for the gate and ready, come straight out of the house to me and we'll be off. We'll leave before the army has got it fixed in their minds I'm here. What are we waiting for?"

The plan was certain of success, unless they encountered Danilo Lesendra. Delight knew from many little signs given during the last four days that she was unguarded and free of observation; she doubted if even Lesendra would venture to detain her by force, should she insist upon entering Rupert's automobile. Count Balsic had kept his word in letter and spirit; she was his guest, not his prisoner. That trust was like an iron chain about her limbs, binding, however it chafed.

"No," she refused, clenching her fingers on the thin fabric of her dress until the lace at her breast tore. "No."

"Meaning you ain't coming?"

The girl shook her head. It was not Rupert's way to protest. He slipped his hands into the pockets of his long dust-coat and stood grimly waiting. But his acute black eyes scrutinized his companion, noting differences. The gay, wilful Delight Warren who met him in Tours had altered, yet not as her story would have led him to expect. He was not looking at a heart-broken woman, but at an angry girl. Rupert began to summon his own recollections of Stefan Balsic, and to recall that Danilo Lesendra was concerned in this. When Delight finally raised her eyes to him, he was half-prepared for her speech.

"It is not as you think," she essayed explanation. "Count Balsic has only taken me for what he believes is a good purpose. He has done me no harm, except to bring me here. It is not that—that he wants me, but to protect this country from danger."

"Indicating you look to him like an anarchist, home address Paterson, N. J.?"

"Not I, but—" she looked earnestly at the racing-driver, her eyes begging his credence. "You will believe me, not him? For he is wrong, horribly wrong! He—does not trust Lieutenant Balsic, his brother Michael. He thinks Michael would use my money to work evil here; yes, anarchy. He thinks Michael so wicked that it was no cruelty to me to prevent our marriage. It is

not true, it is some mistake. You do believe me—that I am right?"

"I ain't doing such snappy work in convicting since once I convicted the wrong man and helped pull on the rope," said Rupert briefly. "I'm here on your side."

"Then go without me; go to Michael." She leaned toward him, fired by her own idea, that had leaped into existence almost as she spoke. "I am safe here. Everyone is even kind to me. Count Balsic has promised to set me free, later. He will keep his word. It is Michael who is in danger, danger he may not suspect; of which I cannot even talk without putting him in greater peril. You must see him alone; tell him where no one can overhear."

"What am I going to tell him?"

Delight rose, laying both hands on his arm and glancing about the balcony for chance listeners. The sunny arcade was empty; even Irenya had substituted delicacy for etiquette and remained in the castle.

"Tell him that he is suspected of treason and betraying the uniform he wears;" the daughter of soldiers felt the hot blood rise in her cheeks merely at voicing the accusation. "He is believed by Count Balsic and Captain Lesendra to have sold himself to Austria, and to be promoting anarchistic socialism in Montenegro. Tell him I am not

breaking a confidence in repeating this, because Count Balsic would be most glad of all men to see his brother, even if his enemy, cleared of such disgrace. You will remember?"

"I'll remember. What more?"

She looked fearlessly into the eyes so near her own.

"Tell him to forget me and work for his honor. I am safe and loyal to him, but a prisoner until he proves himself not guilty. Tell him that Count Balsic has promised to free me absolutely, in every way, the day Michael Balsic clears himself of the charge. And—and go quickly, dear Rupert!"

He nodded slowly, unsmiling.

"I'm going, since that's the order. And if you've changed your ideas about staying here, when I get back, I'll take you away with me if I have to borrow a monoplane across in Italy."

"You are coming back?"

"When I leave here for Broadway, I ain't denying it will be because you don't see any more use for me."

Delight gave him her hands with impulsive gratitude and relief.

"I could not ask it," she exclaimed. "But I did hope you would! Thank you—thank you. Oh, if you knew what it means to me to feel that Michael is warned, and you near! Only go; go before you are stopped."

Rupert was stopped, in the hall. As he would have passed out, Irenya came across his path. Hurrying along with lowered head, she did not perceive the stranger's presence until Rupert stepped aside and held open the door toward which she manifestly aimed. Then she did halt, blue-black eyes flashing into recognition and some other thought more difficult to read.

"Excellency—" she faltered, poising on one white-shod foot with the supple sway of a dancer. The gold and silver bracelets tinkled as she let her arms fall by her sides with a gesture of helplessness.

Rupert waited, imperturbable, if a trifle surprised by her obvious embarrassment. That it was occasioned by his own action did not occur to him.

"Excellency, you are pleased to mock at me," reproached Irenya.

He looked at her, with the level glance that seemed to mark the equality on which they met.

"Tell me when I did it, and I'll pay my fine, Miss Lesendra."

"You—open the door."

"It being the wrong one? I'm ready to open all the rest."

Her full bosom rose with a swift breath; she put back her head, uncertainty misting eyes half awakening to laughter.

"For me?"

"I guess it wouldn't be for anyone else. And if there's any other thing I can do, why, I'm driving this way again in a couple of days."

"You are generously kind."

"I don't recognize the description," said Rupert drily. "But I'd like to practise at it when I come again. Saying Good-by—" he held out his hand.

The result was horrifying, to him. Irenya hesitated, then bent her fair head, touched the offered hand with her lips, and retired with a fine effect of regal humility.

Unaccustomed red scorching through his dark cheek, Rupert was before her, blocking her retreat. He was not so new to this country that he had escaped witnessing the humble salute of woman to man; he did not misunderstand. But never had he connected local customs with this accomplished young beauty, who spoke to him in his own tongue and called herself Lesendra.

"Are you supposing I knew you were going to do that?" he snapped, the drawl gone. "If you are, I've had hard luck with my looks and I'll go disqualify myself from decent society. What?"

Puzzled by the language, yet comprehending his meaning well enough and secretly exultant at his passing her impromptu test of an American,

Irenya gave him a glance as old as womanhood and of all races.

"Not so bad, Excellency's luck," consoled the hypocrite, and slipped past like the bird she resembled.

Almost past.

"It ain't my way, but I've got to reverse," countered Rupert, his eye still grim.

Delight had no thoughts to spare Irenya when Danilo Lesendra's fiancée emerged on the balcony. She was watching Jack Rupert in the court below and quivering with anxiety lest his departure should be prevented at the last moment. How the soldiers pressed about him, she fretted! Suppose Count Balsic should ride in—what would the American do? She hardly knew when Irenya came to her side.

Rupert was declining his sixth cup of coffee, his thoughts neither anxious nor sentimental. He indeed paused in entering his car, but his gaze was not upon the balcony where Delight watched and Irenya pensively considered her own dimpled fingers.

"A thousand miles from a bootblack!" he muttered with discontent, surveying the dimmed luster of the high-heeled tan shoe he had set on the running board; and swung himself into his seat.

CHAPTER VII

Countess Délice

Rupert was on his way to Michael. The knowledge nestled in the heart of Delight. Michael would be warned, would defend himself and win her freedom. She even cherished a secret fancy that the blond, dashing soldier-lover she had known, would return with Rupert; would challenge Stefan Balsic to lay bare the charges, and would clear himself in one magnificent effort of indignant innocence. Yes, she had done well, a thousand times better than if she had meanly fled with Jack Rupert! After all, she was as sheltered here as she could be in any place until this marriage was annulled and she made Michael's wife.

It was an hour since the automobile had gone beyond her vision; the last glint of it vanished into a deep gorge whose black mouth the girl could just discern. Irenya had disappeared with the last glimpse of the car. Keenly alive and restless, buoyant with a sense of heavy anxiety removed and expectant of the future, Delight started up and walked along the balcony.

At the extreme end of the balcony a flight of stone steps twisted down and curved into an em-

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brasure below. Where the stair ended Delight did not know, but now she began the descent. Since she had kept her word to Stefan Balsic, staying when she might have fled, she felt a new confidence and ease; a reviving of self-respect and a fearlessness almost gay in contrast to her late dejection.

The stair took a final capricious bend and then stopped short, still outdoors. Delight stopped also, opening her brown eyes with a surprised sense of prediction verified. She had anticipated adventure, and here was Danilo Lesendra.

The officer in question was alone, seated in the checkered sunshine and shadow of a second and smaller balcony. He smoked a heavily-perfumed Russian cigarette; the girl averted her head with distaste from the cloying, narcotic smoke drifted toward her by a current of air. But the cigarette was merely incidental; his actual occupation interested her more. Captain Lesendra was cleaning his pistol; a resplendent pistol, masking deadliness with inlay of gold and pearl, and shining comeliness of blue steel.

"Good-morning," said Delight, when she had sufficiently studied the situation.

Lesendra lifted his head quickly, then threw away the cigarette and rose. The hush of noon lay on the place, but he had not heard her light footstep.

"Good-morning, madame," he returned punctiliously. "May I offer a chair?"

"I think you may," she descended the last step. "That is, if I do not interrupt?"

"Certainly not, madame."

Did he know of Rupert's visit? She wondered, yet would not ask. Instead, she looked at the pistol.

"You clean your own revolver, Captain Lesendra?"

"Always, madame."

"Pray take your seat, and continue. I am a little weary of so much solitude, but I must go back to my tower if you treat me so formally."

He smiled, the bright charm of his expression bringing to his face that faint resemblance to Michael which had once before struck the girl to whom Michael was dear.

"Thank you," she approved, as he obeyed her. "Now, will you explain that 'always' please? Is it an amusement, or a tradition? And I thought such things only needed cleaning after they were used."

It was delightful to play at light-heartedness again, even for a passing moment. Lesendra met her well; evincing no surprise at this change in the captive's mood.

"Madame, when King Nikolas walks out, it is his custom to halt men at random and inspect the pistol they carry."

"Well?"

"Each day we are ready to meet the King."

She laughed.

"Is the royal tongue so sharp? What is the penalty for an uncleaned weapon?"

"A term in prison," drily.

Delight stopped laughing.

"Really, Captain Lesendra?"

"Certainly, madame."

"For an unready gun!"

"For an unready soldier," he corrected.

"Oh! It is only discipline for soldiers, then?"

"Madame, every Montenegrin is a soldier between the ages of sixteen and sixty. And when the King once refused a veteran of eighty permission to enlist, in time of war, the old man shot himself."

Must she be met at each turn with some new evidence of how these tough-fibred men valued life less than many things? Could she not forget fear for Michael during one hour? She sat without replying to the last speech, while Lesendra deftly manipulated the glittering pistol.

The music of Irenya's sweet singing-voice, floating from the tower above, suggested a topic that might safely break a silence already too long.

"I think Irenya told me that she is betrothed to you, Captain Lesendra," said Delight.

"It is so, madame."

"I congratulate you. Is the wedding to be soon—while," she hesitated, "while I am here?"

"Not very soon, madame. I am not ready."

"Indeed?" with sarcasm. "You are an ardent lover, sir."

Danilo Lesendra glanced at the storm rising across the fair field of his companion's face, and smiled.

"Did I say I was a lover, madame? This marriage is of arrangement; Count Balsic's final act of care for his ward. She is half-Russian, indulged beyond the custom and judgment of this country; few Montenegrin gentlemen would understand or humor her. I can do both."

"That beautiful, affectionate child is to be married as a duty—accepted as a charge! That is your conception of kindness to her?"

"Is it so different from a French or Italian marriage?" he countered, with perfect good temper. "Believe me, Irenya will be very happy, madame. Our girls are not reared to the same view of life as yours. In fact, she met the plan with grateful pleasure. But she is young, and I am busy; that can wait."

Delight rose, exasperated beyond self-control. At the moment she cordially detested Danilo Lesendra and every other man in Crnagora.

"I hope Irenya refuses you!" she stated vindictively. "I hope you will love some woman, lose

her and ache for her; and that she laughs at you and your amazing vanity as all civilized women would—as I do, Captain Lesendra!"

She swept toward the little staircase, head lifted. Lesendra rose with her.

"Will madame take this?"

She glanced across her shoulder. He was offering her the heavy pistol her small fingers could scarcely have cocked, lazy mischief in his eyes.

"Why should I take that thing, sir?"

"You are more warlike than I, madame."

Ordinarily no one would have melted sooner than Delight, before the playful surrender. But now she saw only its rebuke and felt a fresh spur of aggravation.

"You are rude, Captain Lesendra!" she flared. "I shall complain to Count Balsic of what I meet in his house."

Hardly spoken, the words recoiled their full significance upon the girl's mind. She had taken shelter with her husband, had tacitly accepted their relationship. But she could not retract, and almost with realization came curiosity to know what position Stefan Balsic had given her in his household; whether the officer would laugh or apologize.

He did neither. Abruptly grave, he slipped the pistol into his belt and bowed.

"As you will, madame," he said, and stood with stiff formality until she had gone.

Before she had reached her own balcony, Delight's temper had given place to vexation with herself. She paused, half-minded to go back and make peace with one she felt to be a friend, then Irenya's voice decided her and she entered the tower.

"What were you singing, Irenya?" she questioned, surveying the girl who was busied at one of the quaint, massive wardrobes which had once contained the fine raiment of the Russian. Those wardrobes still kept the fragrance of roses, and scented the American's garments with that attar her predecessor had loved.

"That is a song from the Gorski Viyenac, Countess Délice, which you would call the Mountain Wreath, and which was composed by a prince. It is a great writing, very great! It has a heart which beats."

"Have you, Irenya?"

"Naturally yes, Countess Délice, or how could I live and walk about?"

Delight laughed, sentiment routed by practicality. All her restless desire for action stirred anew.

"Since you are so wise, Irenya Ivanovna, tell me what to do? I want to be amused—or busy. Shall I help you hang up my frocks, there?"

The younger girl clasped her hands, eyes lighting with anticipation.

"Not hang them up! Let me dress you in one of these, Countess Délice—one of these you have not worn. Always you choose one so plain; just white. Even I am more gay! This one of blue, let us say, with fur which is like silk."

Delight contemplated the trousseau which had come to so unforeseen a destination. She remembered choosing each piece, her care in taking the colors Michael had preferred, her thoughts of wearing them for him.

"Very well," she slowly yielded. "We will dress for dinner, just you and I."

Irenya's enchantment made the prosaic ceremony a frolic, to which Delight's mood lent itself. Sunset tinted the rooms when the two girls finished; a sunset wild and strange as those of legends from dim lands, blood-red sky burning behind naked, huge, black peaks. Delight dropped a caressing arm about her companion's shoulders and drew her to the window. She felt herself positively elderly beside the Montenegrin. She meant to propose taking Irenya with her, when she was free to return to America. Danilo Lesendra should be relieved of his charge, and some American find it a privilege.

But as her lips parted on the first word, she was checked by the sound of riders in the court-

yard below; a door crashed, a stir of life and movement ran through the whole castle.

"My lord comes home," interpreted Irenya, placidly content. She was drenched with the contents of an overturned bottle of the American's *eau de lis;* a spot of rice-powder on her small nose betrayed experiments with a vanity-box, and she wore two new bracelets.

Delight had not required the information. She, too, knew the castle awoke at the step of its master. Would they tell him of Rupert's visit? Would he recognize the identity of the motorist and guess where she had sent her messenger? Well, Rupert had gone beyond capture. She continued to look at the sunset, but she no longer saw its flaming color.

She was hardly surprised when Irenya was summoned to the door, a few moments later, and returned to announce Count Balsic. But it was with a defiant sense of victory already secured that she went to the outer room.

Stefan Balsic was awaiting her there. As before, he had come to her immediately upon his arrival, but this time there was less weariness in his face. At sight of the girl looking as she might have looked had she been his wife by choice instead of force, a change all pleasant swept the grave endurance from his expression.

"Madame!" he greeted her.

Involuntarily Delight drew back before his advance, flushing and suddenly conscious of the change Irenya had wrought. He stopped at once.

"You are not afraid of me, madame?"

The challenge stung her out of embarrassment into reprisal.

"Oh no!" she denied coldly. "I imagine there is nothing more you can do to me."

"'Would' might be better than 'can.' I understand you wished to see me."

"I—?" astonished.

"Danilo told me so."

"He told you that, himself?"

"Yes."

"And—why?"

"Yes."

She hesitated, troubled and wholly ashamed. The episode had been absurdly childish; nothing was farther from her mind, even at the time, than actually bringing any complaint against Lesendra.

"If he has told you, what have I to say?" she evaded. "You know it was nothing."

"I beg your pardon. It is much that my wife should be offended in my house. If you have found Danilo at fault, he must account for it, or go."

"And you a Montenegrin!" the girl retorted.

"Do you not know," he asked quietly, "that caste is stronger than nationality? Or will not

your republicanism admit it? The gentlemen of all races have kinship and certain standards in common. Moreover, in what is a Montenegrin different from a German or an American? We are not black, or Mongolian, or Semitic. If our country is wild and unmodern, it is because centuries ago we chose isolation instead of slavery. Our peasants are far above the Russian, clean of life and mind. And they are learning the new art of peace."

Delight was silent, with a sense of rebuked pettiness. Why did she show her worst to these men, she wondered, angry with herself? Was it wise; was it worthy of her, even?

"Pray say no more to Captain Lesendra," she requested, after a moment during which she partly turned away. "I provoked him to a jesting reply, then was unreasonable enough to resent it. I had not supposed you would hear of the matter. Captain Lesendra lacks a sense of humor as badly as I."

"Where I am concerned, perhaps he does."

This time she fairly faced him.

"Why? Are you so dangerous?"

"What do you think?" he questioned, meeting her glance with a touch of amusement.

She accepted the offer, deliberately studying his face with her large, bright eyes as she might have studied a page turned for her reading. Here-

tofore, Michael's face had come between her and this man's on each of their three meetings. She had seen him through mists. But now she looked with breathless attention.

What did she see? Power; the strength against which she had so vainly combated. Habit of thought and habit of command had been molding with subtle touches here; the gray eyes had seen so much that they were surface-calm as deep-running water. It was the diplomat's face, baffling inspection; overlaid with quietness, yet ready as a drawn sword. Dangerous? Yes, and no. She did not find—

"Why did you force the arrest of the poor young man who stole your purse?" she demanded, with the impulsive directness he attracted from her. "He shot himself. You refused him mercy—was that worth while?"

She had surprised him with that question, so different from the comment he expected. But he answered at once and without evasion.

"The Austrian officer? He was not a thief, but a spy. The pocket-book he stole contained papers entrusted to me by the King. If he had been here or in Russia, I would have managed the matter in my own way. We were in Paris, so I let the French police arrest him for the theft. That he shot himself rather than suffer trial and punishment as a common criminal—since his

government could not acknowledge his agency—was natural, and no affair of mine."

He did not tell her of the thousand-franc gift to the enemy's wife and child. Knowing of it, as she looked at him the girl divined that he had pitied the Austrian, as he had pitied Delight Warren. But not for that had he spared either. She began to understand the noble in whom were fused the fierce, unparalleled patriotism bequeathed by untamed Montenegro, and the Russian inheritance of ability and relentlessness.

"I heard it—differently," she yielded excuse.

"From Michael? I am not astonished."

"No; at the convent," Delight amended naïvely.

It was impossible not to smile. Catching his glance, the girl's lips curved into irrepressible sympathy of humor.

"There are unexpected founts of gossip in the dry monotony of truth," said Stefan Balsic. "Let us lay aside tragedy for a while, madame. Will you honor my table by dining with me to-night?"

Distinctly startled, she sobered, groping for inoffensive terms of refusal. He forestalled her.

"Is the prospect so appalling? Believe me, madame, in your own New York you may have sat at the board with men whose consciences carried heavier memories than the death of a spy."

"It is not that," she stammered, then proudly

recovered herself. "I wronged you there; I was misinformed. But you may not wish me for your guest. I have broken my promise to you, while you were away."

He waited, but she saw a ripple cross the gray eyes. The impulse that compelled her to honesty carried her to still further candor.

"I saw a visitor to-day. He was my friend, a man I can trust. I sent him with messages you would not have allowed me to send if you had been here. Oh, I thought, then, I had the right, but now I know I had not! I am not sorry—I would do the same again; but I have not been true prisoner to you."

"You gave your promise to stay in my house. You are here."

"If you had locked me in a prison, I could not have spoken to him. I have used my liberty against you. You shall not say I deceive you!" Excitement broke her voice. "Count Balsic, I sent word to Michael of your accusations against him; all you told me, all! I told him to defend himself, and of what he is suspected. All—"

She could find no more words. Panting, fearless yet trembling with nervous expectation, she regarded the man.

"Child, do you suppose he did not know?" asked Stefan Balsic, very compassionately.

It was as if she had been running, pressing

desperately toward a goal, heart pounding, muscles strained, and suddenly found herself plunged into blank, black stillness. She made no protest; her wide eyes had recognized knowledge in his. After an instant she turned to a chair and sat down, a little dizzied and uncertain of herself. Michael knew himself facing such charges, and had not told the girl who was to take his name? He had planned to marry her in France, to spend a long honeymoon in travel, and all the while leave his honor uncleared, undefended?

"Will you dine with me, madame?" came the smooth, strong voice.

"Yes."

"Thank you. In an hour, since you are so good."

The blood-red glow died out of the room. By and by one of the patient women came in and lighted the tall lamps, lingering over the task to steal furtive glances of admiration at the slim, straight lady in strange attire who sat so still. Irenya looked in, and tactfully withdrew. Delight saw both attendants come and go, without heeding their movements. She was not grieving; she was busy. Resiliently her faith had sprung up from the blow and she was at woman's age-old work, mending the torn robe of honor in which she clothed her lover.

There were so many excuses for Michael. Per-

haps he had meant to tell her when they met at Tours. He might have shrunk from writing of the charge of which the mere suspicion seemed to soil. Or—and to this her mind leaped and clung—or perhaps he knew himself innocent and able to prove innocence, so cast the whole ugly thing aside as of no consequence. Yes, that was it! She sprang up, almost happy in the revulsion from a doubt that threw down all her world.

Irenya was drawing aside a curtain, demure eyes lowered, yellow head bent. The hour was ended and her host was at the door.

Not altogether the host Delight anticipated. For the first time she saw Stefan Balsic in evening-dress instead of in the rich and characteristic uniform of the country. Meeting him so, for the first time also she recognized in him the man beside whom her own social experience was that of a provincial débutante. She laid her fingers on his arm with a shyness she had not even known in her sophisticated childhood. She had been the Montenegrin noble's prisoner; with helpless dismay she remembered she was this man's wife.

The table was laid in a room Delight had not yet seen. Two swarthy, lithe youths, clad in white linen, served.

"Albanians," Count Balsic answered her glance at them. "Their father had a blood-feud in his own country, so they fled over the border and

became naturalized here. I have cared little for delicate food, but now I will send for a French or Italian chef. Let me hope you will not suffer too much in the meantime."

"Thank you; I do very well," she replied, forcing herself to answer on his own tone. "It has rather a charm to *commence* dinner with cheese. And to be attended by 'Albania's savage men' is an event."

"There is a less usual native in the castle, tonight, who might repay inspection: a Bosnian."

"A Bosnian?"

"Yes; a man from Sarájevo. Danilo tells me he arrived soon after Mr. Jack Rupert left you."

Delight looked up quickly.

"You—know—"

"Your visitor? Why not? He is rather a conspicuous person in this country. Danilo was much disappointed at missing him, I believe. Perhaps he will accept our hospitality a little longer, if he comes again."

She was learning; she did not even doubt a double meaning lay in the speech.

"Thank you," she acknowledged the courtesy to her friend. Remembering how she had hurried Rupert away in dread of his meeting Stefan Balsic, the color rose in her smooth cheek. "He will come, again."

The confidence was understood. Presently the

host took up his duty of conversation, speaking lightly and easily of topics pleasant to both: of a new opera by one of the greatest young Italian composers, whom he knew; of certain Russian dancers he had seen in St. Petersburg and Delight in New York; of books read by both. The girl met him, piqued by his charm and practised tact into showing herself not dull. After four days alone with Irenya, this hour sparkled.

When the dinner ended, Delight rose with a sense of confused time and values. How did she come to be lightly playing the social game with the man from whom every outraged feeling should have forced her apart? How was it possible to like and respect her abductor and Michael's enemy? She did not know, but she laid her fingers on the arm offered and walked beside Stefan Balsic to the door of the princess's tower. There he bowed formal leave, and she went in, alone.

Irenya started awake, drowsy-eyed, from a nest of silken cushions. It was ten o'clock.

A melancholy quiver of pulled strings was in the air, proceeding from the darkness beyond the windows; a sound wavering and untraceable as the night-wind that brought it. It affected the American oddly, somehow troubling the mood left by the bright hours just passed.

"What is that music, Irenya?" she questioned, when she was ready for the night.

"That is the gusla of a Bosnian who arrived this afternoon, Countess Délice. When he heard there was a great lady in the castle, he asked permission to serenade her dreams. At the foot of the tower he sits."

The gusla! Recollections of Lalla Rookh and Don Juan, of bulbuls and oriental gardens brought whimsical laughter to Delight's expression.

"Throw him a French gold-piece from my purse," she resigned herself to the experience. "I fancy gold is gold everywhere."

"Of a surety it could not well be anything else," observed Irenya the practical. "Also money cannot be thrown in the dark with any good result, Countess Délice; for which I will send the gold by messenger."

The music of the gusla persisted, long after Delight was ensconced in her medieval canopied bed. The sound oppressed her with an unaccountable discomfort, continuing even into her sleep. It dripped, she fancied as she drifted toward unconsciousness, dripped note by note like some trickling, heavily-sweet liquid.

CHAPTER VIII

The Other House

It was a wild trail that led to the house of Michael Balsic; such a trail as Jack Rupert had never yet encountered in Europe or America. The laconic racing-driver was wont to grow more grimly dumb as chance struck each successive blow at any enterprise in his charge, but when he brought his machine around a turn and just stopped with two wheels hovering over a sheer fall of a thousand feet of lava-gray cliff, he unconsciously and fervently committed lèse-majesté by laying the road's designer under every malediction evolved by time, hate, and Broadway.

Loose stones cut the tires from the rims, delaying progress for repairs. It was necessary to stop absolutely to permit the passing of each troup of terrified mules and amazed mountaineers. The blood-red sunset Delight watched from her balcony was flaming along the west before her envoy sighted his journey's end.

It was a bare, bleak group of houses fixed on a broad ledge against the mountainside; an oasis amidst the naked Karst, made possible by a little watercourse. The largest house in the village was that of Michael Balsic, yet it compared poorly with the castle overlooking ancient Zeta. But Montenegro is poor, with the honorable poverty of

a warrior whose life has had no leisure for gain. That was no discredit to Michael.

It was not the humbleness of the place that brought frowning discontent to Rupert's expression as he approached, but its air of slack disorder. Even fatigue could not reconcile his fastidious taste to this resting place. However, he brought his car to a halt before the principal dwelling, where it was promptly surrounded by the entire population. A strange population, even to the American's untrained judgment of national characteristics. It was the country's policy to welcome alien citizens who were willing to take the oath of allegiance to Crnagora; but it was not common to see a village where Albanians, cold-eyed Turks and men from Austrian Novi-Pazar outnumbered the native Montenegrins.

"I ain't pre-supposing you'll get me any better than they did where I last called," Rupert addressed the crowd generally, waving them back with strong disfavor. "Nor this ain't a subway train for Brooklyn at six o'clock; it's a private car. Come farther off! I want Mr. Michael Balsic. *Balsic!*"

To his second astonishment on that day, a short, square-shouldered man in European dress pushed forward and replied in the stiffly exact English taught in Teutonic universities.

"Sir, you are before the house you seek. I will give myself the distinguished honor of introducing you into the interior."

"Do," urged Rupert, after an appraising survey. "And you might tell your friends here this machine is the make that explodes when you touch it."

"Sir?"

"You heard me, I guess."

The man looked at the car, and at its owner, then spoke a few rapid sentences at which the crowd recoiled from the gray automobile with a unanimity flattering to the translation. Bringing his heels together, he made a military bow to the American and opened the house-door.

"Made in Germany," Rupert commented, following.

The remark had been a casual one, made without special intent. But the man wheeled quickly; his eyebrows, naturally slanted, drew down at the inner corners with an effect of animal-like snarling, although his heavy lips smiled artificially.

"Sir, I have the honor to be an Italian—of Ragusa," he corrected. "I am a seller of fine cloth, a merchant."

"You should worry nights about how you'll fill all the orders you must get up here," commiserated Rupert, with his drawling coolness.

The retort was a trifle involved for the Continental. He hesitated an instant, still smiling, then led the way in nonplussed silence.

The house was no better ordered within than without, yet showed an unexpected lavishness of

furnishing that could have been regulated into comfort. Money had been spent here, and recently, but without discrimination. A girl in dingy finery met them in the capacity of servant. To her the Ragusan with the Teutonic accent spoke in apparent introduction of the visitor, and bowing still more elaborately, retired. The girl led Rupert to an inner room, indicating by a gesture that he was to enter alone.

The bedchamber was handsome enough in an uncared-for fashion, and somewhat the same might have been said of the young man upon the couch. He was wrapped in a dressing-gown of brocaded silk crumpled and frayed as if by much feverish tossing, unfastened at the throat and leaving bare his strong, white neck in which two pulses could be seen beating like visible timepieces of that fever. He had risen on his elbow as the door opened, shaking back his tumbled blond hair and fixing on the guest eyes beneath whose light-blue surfaces sullen fire seemed to roll and waver, rise and fall, even cloud as if drifts of dark thought passed across like smoke.

"Who are you?" he said imperiously. "An American, here—can you come from Miss Warren? Are you the man she wrote of, with whom she traveled? You have come for some purpose, sir!"

Rupert's dark face locked with a finality like the snap of a turned key. He had formed one of his instantaneous, immovable dislikes; even deeper

than his profound amazement at this first sight of Delight Warren's lover.

"Lieutenant Michael Balsic, I guess?" he identified unhurriedly. "My name is J. Rupert, of New York. And I didn't run up this jellied volcano for the drive, as you say."

"You have a message, from her?"

"I'm supposed to tell you what happened to Miss Warren on her way here. I guess you ain't in special need of the information. I left my crystal at the fortuneteller's on my last regular visit, but somehow I seem to see that you know all about that, already, and probably can bear not hearing it again."

"Know?" said Michael Balsic through shut teeth. "I knew all from the two cowards who drove her carriage, before I had them shot."

The American gave him a long look—then tipped a pile of vari-colored novels off the least-encumbered chair, sat down and crossed his legs.

"I saw some gunmen in New York, once, on their way to Sing-Sing prison for electrocution," he observed.

The innuendo did not pass. It was not answered, but Michael fell back on his pillows, fighting down his own passion. When he spoke again, the difference in manner and voice startled, so great was the change.

"Make allowance for much, Mr. Rupert. I have been close to insanity from grief and helplessness. My promised wife—all I had hoped from life, all I planned—gone! The woman I love is the heartbroken victim of the man who has hunted me down for years. Did you expect to find me calm and reasonable? Have you no more to tell me?"

"Considerable. But it ain't soothing. And I've been warned to report the outlook only when there are no dictagraphs, living or factory-made, near about."

The avid glance fastened on the American.

"It is safe here. Go on. She has a plan for escape?"

"She's worried more about something else," said Rupert. "I'm to tell you that Count Balsic and my friend Lesendra think they've got you caught in a graft deal with Austria. They think you've been selling out your friends and throwing the game by crooked work in your own party. And when they're sure of it, the machine will shut down on you—hard."

Michael threw back his head, gazing steadily at the other man. There was neither fear nor indignation in his face, but a contempt that was almost mocking and a defiance verging on strange mirth.

"No news in that," he pronounced. "Let Cousin Danilo look to himself! What else?"

"That Count Balsic married Miss Warren because he wouldn't trust you with her money. And he'll send her free to America to get a divorce, the day your case is decided either way. She sent me to tell you not to try getting her away, but to clear up your own record and she could come to you."

He had stirred the Montenegrin, at last. Michael started half-erect, clenching his hands upon the drapery of the couch.

"A divorce!" he cried. "I have been a fool, blind. An American—of course! Because our law allows no such thing, I could see no breaker of marriage but—"

The stop was full.

"Say it," drily advised Rupert. "I guess there is only one finish to cap that jet of language."

Michael Balsic relaxed, veiling his eyes like a woman, like a woman taking refuge in weakness.

"Death," he sighed, "is apt to come to any man, so is a chance to be considered. Will you not reach the cognac beside you, Mr. Rupert? I have been ill."

"Sure to come to every man," improved the New Yorker. He rose and took the desired article from the top of a rosewood cellarette gray with dust and marred by spilled alcohol. "I ain't denying I've thought several times to-day this is a country likely to hasten keeping that date."

"This country? What do the men of your

America do, Mr. Rupert, to an enemy who injures a woman? Nothing?"

"You've guessed wrong."

"They have him killed?"

"No; they kill him," snapped Rupert curtly, and re-took his chair.

Michael picked up the cognac and delicately filled two glasses. But he looked as if he had already swallowed the stimulant; his color was high and his regard animated. He showed no offense when his guest refused the brandy offered; indeed, his thoughts were afar from the subject.

"There is law in Montenegro, even for Stefan Balsic," he declared, when his own glass was empty. "You have reminded me of many things. There are the forces of your United States to appeal for aid. There is even Miss Warren's family. I never dreamed," with a slight laugh, "that I should come to seek those enemies of mine for aid against one more dangerous! A divorce—it only needs to get her out of his hands and on a steamship. Mr. Rupert, a broken ankle will not yet permit me to ride; will you drive me to Cetinje?"

"Meaning that you don't intend to take things up from the end Miss Warren asked?"

"No. Why should I leave her a prisoner for one unnecessary hour? And, do you believe Stefan would keep his promise to set her free?"

"Yes."

"Do you know the Greek church would hold her divorce no release for him? He would be bound to celibacy while she lived. He will never release her unless we compel it."

The American had not known that. He recalled Delight as he had seen her on the balcony of Count Balsic's house, her copper-bronze little head uplifted like a flower in the strong sunlight that could show no flaw in her fresh youth. Would Stefan Balsic continue unmoved by the presence of such a captive? Would he watch his wife depart, knowing he could bring no successor to his hearth? Jack Rupert was no convent girl; he was a man and he knew men.

Michael waited on the silence whose significance he comprehended. When he judged the moment right, he made his closing argument.

"With all modesty I say it; Miss Warren's love is set on me, Mr. Rupert. Her coming on this wild journey to me proves it. She has the right to decide with whom she will pass her life. Her choice may not be yours—well, are not many women happy with men you and I would dislike?"

"I'll drive you to Cetinje," briefly conceded Rupert.

"And testify against Stefan before the English consul? Give the story to your American newspapers? With you as witness, even the King must act."

Rupert brought his black eyes from abstracted scrutiny of the cellarette and turned them upon the other's face. And he did not find there the debonair beauty that had won Delight Warren.

"Attending to my own schedule is one of my special habits," he signified. "I'll leave deciding all that until I feel stronger."

"You remind me it is time for dinner. Let me place you in Josef's care, while I make ready. I believe you saw him? A faithful fellow; the only one here who speaks your language. He is a Servian by birth, now a citizen of Crnagora. Do we start to-night?"

"He told me something like that, outside," said Rupert, with composed irony. "No, we ain't likely to start until morning; I've set my heart on being killed somewhere else." He rose, as Josef opened the door. "But this Cetinje business needs telling to Miss Warren. She expects some word from you."

Before replying, Michael Balsic poured and drank another glass of the brandy. When he looked at the New Yorker again, the smoke-darkness clouded his light-blue eyes to impenetrability.

"She has it," he explained. "This morning I sent a letter to her with assurance of all I hoped to do for her release. She knows I am informed of all and devoted to her. I found a safe messenger—a Bosnian from Sarájevo."

CHAPTER IX

The Man from Saráyevo

It was neither Stefan nor Michael Balsic who came first to Delight's awakening thoughts, the morning that her lover and Jack Rupert commenced the drive to Montenegro's capital. She was one of those who are sensitive to the reproach of an ungenerous action as to that of a crime. And she felt that she had been neither generous nor just to Danilo Lesendra, absurd as the affair was.

The castle drowsed in the noon heat, when she went down the twisted flight of stone steps to the lower arcade. She went lightly, with the buoyancy of physical health that rejects depression. In spite of the gusla, she had slept long and well; the air she breathed was pure and fine, the sparkling essence of earth's high places. Moreover, she was going to free herself of a weight.

The young officer was not in the arcade. Unreasonably disappointed, Delight walked on a few steps, then paused with a sudden doubt of the propriety of her invasion. Where did this balcony-promenade lead? Perhaps to Count Balsic's own retreats, since she had found his kinsman there. She was about to retire for Irenya's counsel, when Lesendra came between the columns opposite her.

The girl gave him no time for astonishment, holding out her hand in frank pleasure.

"Captain Lesendra! I am glad. I was so sure you would be here that I felt aggrieved at not finding you. I want to make peace, please."

His eyes met hers without a reservation in their gay friendliness, as he bowed over her hand.

"That is readily done, madame, by the one who was pleased to break it," he answered, laughter in his voice.

"But you should not be so literal! It was your fault for taking a woman at her word. How could you suppose I would wish to make you trouble, even if I were really angry?"

"Countess, I have known two kinds of women; the simple, who mean what they say, and the complex, who punish when they can."

"Oh! Then learn a third, who can say what she does not mean, and be just enough to retract it. But I think you have been unfortunate in your experience, Captain Lesendra."

"You convince me of it, madame."

"Except—with Irenya. To which class does she belong? The simple?"

He laughed, refusing the trap. But his eyes grew serious.

"Trust me, Irenya shall be happy, Countess. She is a little white kitten who shall drowse away life in the sun. She will live softly, know no care

until God sends her children for playthings. I am a little better than you think me, perhaps."

"Do you not believe in love, sir?"

"As I know it, it is not for women."

"Not—" bewildered.

"You have your parasol, madame, and perhaps desired to walk. There is a waterfall you might care to see, beyond the wall."

"Thank you." Delight turned with him, and they strolled together down the arcade.

"Will you tell me what you meant, Captain Lesendra."

"That I have loved a man."

She understood, remembering many things seen and heard since the day at Antivari's seaport. Yes, and Michael's long-ago sneer at the kinsman "whom Stefan owned without knowing it." Only, Stefan Balsic did assuredly know. Or—did he? He spoke of Danilo intimately, as of one constantly associated with him, but she could not recall that the speech was tinged by affection.

"Is that better?" she questioned slowly. "Women are less cold; they give more in return."

"Some women, madame."

The musical fall and rush of hurrying water was in their ears, interrupting with the abruptness of a third voice. They had turned a corner of the building and stood directly over a gorge through which poured the stream, boiling and frothing in its

haste to reach the brink. Straight down the green flood fell nearly three hundred feet—and vanished. A swirling pool heaved below, without overflow or outlet, receiving the steady torrent.

It needed no explanation to tell Delight this was one of the subterranean rivers common in that strange corner of Europe. Perhaps it reappeared miles away; perhaps never, flowing into some dark lake not for the eyes of men. There was something secret and furtive about the stream, something sinister in its fury of impatience to find its hidden goal.

"I do not like it," the girl confessed, through the water's tumult. She shivered, drawing back from the edge. "It—looks wicked."

Lesendra broke a twig from a grapevine growing in the fostering spray, and tossed it into the rapids. The vivid green leaves flashed over the cataract, were visible as a streak of emerald in the basin far below, then seemed plucked from sight, so suddenly were they drawn beneath. As she leaned to watch, Delight glimpsed a man squatting near the edge of the pool, peering up. Even at that distance, his eyes glittered like the enamelled eyes of an image, furtive and secret as if he owned some kinship to the river and had been cast up by it as more gracious currents were said to part for undine or naiad. But by the stringed instrument

hung across the figure's shoulder, she identified the Bosnian of the gusla.

"It is wicked," Lesendra's voice struck oddly in accord with her own half-defined thoughts. "Countess, it is like an intriguing mind. Tell me, who of all women should a boy respect most, if the man is to trust them?"

"His mother."

"Sixteen years ago, when I was a boy of nine, my father was killed by the outlaws of the Prokletze—the 'Mountains of the Damned.' My mother was a Russian. She returned to her own country and married again, an officer of the secret police. Understand me, madame; she was not wicked, but weak and easily led. I adored her as a boy will. We lived without an hour's breach between us until I was nineteen. She was gay and fond of pleasure. So was I.

"One day I came home to find a guest in the house, whom my mother presented as a cousin from Montenegro. He was not much older than I, exceedingly handsome and winning in manner. My stepfather and he appeared to know each other intimately, and to have known each other long."

He paused, looking down at the falls. The girl caught a branch of the glistening vine; she divined the name he would not speak; there was something like defiance in the gaze she fixed upon him.

"It was my mother who reminded me that I was a Montenegrin, not a Russian, and it was but honorable that I give my native land its due allegiance and military service. She suggested I write to my kinsman, the head of my house, Stefan Balsic, telling him my wish and asking to be placed with him. I did so, with an enthusiasm fanned by our Montenegrin guest.

"Count Balsic answered my letter kindly and with approval. He bade me come to him at once. Of course, I obeyed. My mother exacted two promises from me, in the pain of our first parting. I was not to mention our guest, who belonged to a branch of the family Count Balsic unreasonably disliked; and I was to write frequently to her, write in detail of my daily life, our in-comings and outgoings. It would be the next thing to living together, she said.

"So I came here. And with the first breath of this air I dropped the ten Russian years from my life and was again the ardent, war-dreaming boy who had seen his father die for Crnagora and planned the same death for himself. I looked at Stefan Balsic, and saw in him a second to that prince whom men once called the Sword of Montenegro.

"I think now that Count Balsic knew from the first of his enemy's presence in my home, and did not wholly trust me. He brought me to the King

at Cetinje and, native as I was, I took the oath of allegiance. I was more than willing; happier than I had ever been in my life. Out of that happiness I wrote to my mother. Indeed, at her suggestion I kept a journal of all the novel life and service; of where I accompanied my chief, our visitors—all the trifles youth finds absorbing. This I sent to her every week. She wrote that I made her prize my love more than when I was beside her; that she existed for my letters.

"At the end of three months came the ruin. Count Balsic sent for me, one morning, and laid before me the pile of journals. His enemy and my mother had made me their spy. Every bit of information had been sifted and resifted by the Secret Police, tirelessly at work to compass his destruction, to detect him in some misstep. The trap had failed because Stefan Balsic had no double dealings with men or nations, and because the Chief of Police was his friend. I had been doing that; I, living in his house, eating his bread—and had no proof under heaven of my incredible, stupid ignorance. The very form of the thing convicted me; my role of catspaw might have come to the surface of casual letters, but the journals!

"'Why should I have done this?' I cried.

"I got my answer.

"'Because you are my heir by the will made when, not knowing you since childhood, I hoped

one of my house might be honest,' said Count Balsic, and at night there are times when I see yet the searing contempt of his eyes. 'Will you still lie to me, Danilo Lesendra?'"

Delight uttered a faint sound; she was pale as the telling had made Lesendra himself.

"You—what could you do? How did you prove—?"

"I did not," answered Lesendra simply. "But I knew I would shoot myself after I left him, and that steadied me to tell him the truth before I went. He knew, too, what I would do; if he had not, I should have been under arrest then. I did not expect him to listen to me, but he did."

"Then—?"

"He took my naked word. I have lived beside him ever since."

The hiss and rushing of the water filled a long pause. A changing breeze finally puffed the spray like light rain across the girl; mechanically moving to avoid it, Delight saw that the Bosnian had moved also, creeping nearer the castle and still peering up.

"Surely the other two, your mother and—the man, exonerated you, Captain Lesendra?"

"Never, madame. And I have fought my way to prove by my life that I deserved Stefan Balsic's pardon. I have served him with blood and spirit, toil of body and toil of mind. I have earned his

trust, and he gives me trust. But I think if I had come to him with clean hands he might have loved me."

"How do you know he does not?" In an outrush of pity and desire to comfort she laid both hands on his arm, lifting her earnest face to him. "How can you tell? He is so grave—he is a man and would not speak of emotion. He must; I am quite sure he does!"

He bent his head and kissed the small fingers.

"Thank you, madame. If he does not—" gaiety flashed into his face once more—"why, I shall earn that, yet. Oh, I am a dreamer! Some day I shall do that which will make him think kindly of poor Danilo Lesendra! 'God will send the beggar a jewel to give,' my father used to say, when he owed a gratitude too great for payment. But noon is gone, madame, and I must go or break discipline. I only meant to show how good a gift you made me last night when you told Count Balsic I had not offended you. May I have the honor to take you back to the arcade?"

"No, thank you. I will stay here alone, for a while."

He was at the columned balcony when she called him back.

"Captain Lesendra!"

"Madame?"

Delight faced him, the wind fluttering her thin

white dress around her, her hair bright about the pallor of her face.

"Do I—know that man?" she asked unsteadily.

Danilo Lesendra looked at the gallant figure, so fragile against the sweep of mountain and sky, and made his gift to her.

"I think you never knew him, madame," he said, and bowed.

Delight sank down on a rock placed like a seat beside the waterfall. Since she was alone, she pressed her hands across her eyes.

"He told the truth," she insisted to herself. "He told the truth. Michael could not do that—not *Michael!*"

Who, then? Perhaps some Russian cousin. Yes, that was it; Lesendra's mother was a Russian. The two "intriguing minds" had devised the plan for Stefan Balsic's ruin, secure that the generous Danilo's inheritance would be shared by them. Probably the weak, ease-loving mother had considered it an actual service she was doing her son in making him rich. She did not realize that in the boy-soldier's veins ran Montenegro's steel and fire; that to dishonor him was to kill him.

Something was twitching the hem of her dress. Startled, Delight let fall her hands and looked down. Narrow, enamel-hard eyes peered up at her from an alien face; the Bosnian with the gusla was at her feet, standing on the rough steps that

led down the gorge to the pool where she had seen him.

"What do you want?" she cried, with a shock of repulsion and surprise. "Why are you here?"

The man made a gesture of deprecation; he did not understand. He touched her dress again, as if to urge her to resume her seat, then put his hand into the folds of his shawl and drew out an envelope. With a leap of the pulses Delight comprehended. Who was there but Michael who would write to her with this caution? She held out eager hands.

The Bosnian was not ready for such haste. He stared at the girl, looking afterward past her with anxious care, and up at the castle-wall. Satisfied at last that they were not observed, he passed the letter into her grasp by a movement quick and dextrous enough to escape the eye of anyone not close. Before she could tear the envelope he had settled down on the steps in an attitude of somnolent patience and meditation, fingering his gusla as if waiting the lady's command to play.

The frank American thought of no concealment. Upright in the sunshine, she opened her letter; as she would have done had Lesendra still been present, or Count Balsic himself.

"I know. I have been mad," she read the curt sentences, so different from Michael's graceful speech and writings as to seem not his. "If I try to tell you what I suffer, I shall lose such calmness

as enables me to write at all. There is but one answer to this outrage—I am bringing it. You shall be free and my wife; trust me and wait. Keep the bearer of this in Stefan's house. Keep him, if you have any influence, if you can gain the favor by tears or smiles—if you have to conceal him! Keep him in the castle, my love, my wife. I dare neither address this, nor sign."

She did not know what she had expected, but it was not this. She was trembling, but neither with happy love nor hope of the rescue promised. She looked down at the Bosnian.

Lost honeymoon, broken dreams, the memory of Michael's last kiss in far-away New York—one by one Delight called the ghosts before her; one by one they passed between her and the crouched, passive man from Sarájevo. But the noonday sun is not kind to ghosts; these were too thin and faint to hide the Bosnian.

"What is it you are to do in the castle?" she asked, her clear voice hoarsened by the sudden parching of her throat.

The man spread wide his hands in the gesture of excuse, reminding her that her language was unknown to him. Delight essayed the question in French, German, and her stiff, Ollendorf Italian, but without result. There was something singularly repellent in the stranger she was bidden to retain in the house of Stefan Balsic; all the Oc-

cidental in her rose up in arms against this Oriental. Yet, he was Michael's emissary and she trusted Michael.

"There is but one answer to this outrage."

What answer? The reply leaped out at the girl: death. She knew it as certainly as if it had been written by her lover. Death to Stefan Balsic —by some means, in some warfare beyond her ken. By an instinct surer than logic she turned on the waiting man in swift decision.

"No," she pronounced distinctly. "No!" and tore the letter across.

He looked at her attentively, his eyes unwinking. Delight shook her head in the Esperanto of signs, and on a second impulse moved to the water's edge and dropped the fragments of the note into the torrent. As the green leaves thrown by Lesendra had flashed down and vanished, so the white paper glanced among the glancing waters, was drawn down and swallowed forever.

Her succeeding thought was of retreat to the shelter of her tower and Irenya. She was stayed by the question of how her action would appear to Michael when reported by the Bosnian. How would he interpret her tearing of his letter and refusal to aid him? Indeed, she was insulting him! What right had she to suppose he introduced this man for any darker purpose than to effect her own escape? She would write to him, explaining Count

Balsic's motives and gentle use of her, and why she could not do this thing which seemed like treachery. Resolved, she signed to the man to follow her, and turned to the castle. Yes, she would write, and the Bosnian should carry her letter.

When she reached the arcade, Delight glanced back. The man was too crafty to follow openly. But after she had reached the steps leading to the tower, he rose and began to wander idly up and down, gradually drawing near to the building with apparent aimlessness. The girl could guess his destination; he would place himself beneath her windows, where he had played his serenade the night before. She shivered in keen disgust for his methods; the methods she must adopt if she were to obey Michael.

But Michael did not know. He himself had said it: he was mad with grief. Perhaps he fancied her cruelly treated. Delight understood now that he was as unjust to his brother as Count Balsic was in estimating him.

The Bosnian's spirit was infectious. Delight was angry with herself for the feeling of guilt and furtive secrecy with which she hurried away from the spot where she had twice met Danilo Lesendra.

Irenya was on the tower's balcony, asleep in the sun like the white kitten to which her betrothed likened her. Past her Delight sped cautiously, into the blue room of blended tints and shaded coolness.

Writing-materials were arranged on an inlaid, gilded desk whose gorgeousness time had mellowed to beauty. But the silver stand was innocent of ink, the silver holder contained no pen. Delight ran to the room beyond, flung open her own trunk and searched recklessly for the portfolio she knew it contained.

When she was seated before the desk of the Princess, the pen ready in her fingers, came her first calm thought of what she should write. It was borne in upon her for the first time how slightly she actually knew Michael. Their time together had been so brief; a whirlwind three weeks' wooing and winning, a romance spun of good-looks, youth, passion. Since then, they had only each other's letters.

Different letters from this she had to write! How should she best set forth her situation's delicacy and make him understand in a few words that might go astray and be read by anyone? She was no longer his fiancée; she was Stefan Balsic's wife.

The last three words startled her with their new force. Yes, to the world she was that. The Bosnian's narrow, opaque eyes rose before her with a new meaning in their bold familiarity. What must he think of her, with his Moslem ideas of a woman's close reserve? What would any of the stern and chaste mountaineers think of the wife who wrote tenderly to her husband's enemy? The American dropped the pen and put her hands over

her burning cheeks. Until now, she had never considered herself as being a wife in any sense except that of a prisoner. Count Balsic had so deliberately placed their marriage as no more than a shield for her, that she had forgotten to what she pledged herself. Now she remembered the roadside chapel; poor, bare, of another sect, yet a Christian church where she had been bound.

Presently she sprang up and began to hurry back into the trunk the articles scattered in her search of a few moments past. She did not want Irenya to find the disorder and innocently question her concerning it. Last of all, she laid in the portfolio and closed the lid. No, she had sent her best answer by Jack Rupert. Let Michael free her by proving his own honor.

There remained the Bosnian, waiting at the foot of the tower. Delight reluctantly went out, to the edge of the balcony.

He was watching for her. The girl leaned across the rail and went through a little pantomime of refusal and dismissal, ending with sweeping gesture toward the mountains, where she supposed Michael's house to be. The man did not move.

"You will then fall if you lean so, Countess Délice," observed a mildly reproving voice behind her.

Delight turned eagerly, actual tears of vexation in her eyes.

"Irenya, how does one say no? Say it to this man—tell him to go away. I do not want him."

Irenya came to the rail and looked down.

"You do not desire music, Countess Délice?"

"No, no!"

As Irenya translated the command, to accomplish which task with decorum she went halfway down the twisting stair, Delight chanced to look beyond. Danilo Lesendra was crossing the arcade and had stopped, gazing fixedly toward the two girls and the man from Sarájevo.

"Countess Délice, I had forgotten," apologized Irenya, returning. "Lord Stefan sent a message while you were absent. He desires that you will dine with him, to-night."

The invitation had not been sent in that form, Delight was very well aware. And the prospect allured both her loneliness and the curiosity regarding Stefan Balsic which each new tale heard of him increased. Why should she punish herself like a sulky child by refusing the only interest the long day offered?

"Yes," she decided. "I will go."

"And I shall dress you, Countess Délice?"

"Yes," Delight yielded, laughing at the rapture. "Oh, yes!"

As they went in, she glanced back. The Bosnian had gone, but Lesendra still stood beside the column, his fair head slightly bent.

CHAPTER X

The Message

Jack Rupert did not return to the castle, nor did the Bosnian leave it. The days slipped into a week, a fortnight, yet still the welcome guest did not come or the unwelcome go. It seemed to Delight that the man from Sarájevo was in her path whenever she left the tower, while the melancholy gusla crooned beneath her windows every night.

"You like music, however alien, I learn," Count Balsic observed, one night at dinner. Dining together had become an accepted custom, during those days. "Reshid has obtained leave to continue here, because, he says, you find pleasure in his gusla and reward him with American extravagance."

Delight's fork tinkled against her plate; angry and indignant at the bold insolence which compelled her into the rôle of the Bosnian's conspirator, she looked up.

"I did not tell him so!" she exclaimed. "He is not here by my wish. He had no right to say that."

She broke off, warned by a change in her com-

panion's expression. Very slight, the least chilling of the gray eyes and hardening of the firm lips, but enough to remind her that she accused the man before a judge.

"Ah? Then the Moslem deceived me," said Count Balsic, with perfect composure. "Will you try this rose-comfit? It was made in Stamboul."

But Delight had seen, and knew she could not deliver even the insolent Bosnian to justice when the man had entered the trap to serve her.

"I am afraid I mislead you," she corrected, controlling her voice with an effort that left it cold. "I only meant that I do not care enough for the instrument to have the matter brought to your notice. Please do not keep the man in the castle on my account."

Stefan Balsic was skilled in reading men, not women.

"Are you so unwilling to accept a pleasure from my hand?" he asked bitingly, moved out of his calm for the first time in her knowledge of him. "Be at ease, madame; there was no price attached."

Scarlet and humiliated, unable to defend herself against the charge of a mean suspicion, Delight lowered her eyes and sat silent. Yet something in her attitude had a language, for after an instant he spoke more gently.

"It was not that?"

"No."

"What, then?"

"I—do not know," she stammered. "I think —I like Irenya's music better than the Bosnian's."

There was a pause.

"Will you try the rose-comfit, madame?"

Delight laughed a little uncertainly.

"Please," she accepted the pink sweetmeat. "Do you ever relinquish a point, I wonder?"

"I have relinquished much in my time," Stefan Balsic answered, his strange glance on the girl at his table. "And doubtless will more."

Without knowing why, Delight found no response.

When they separated, an event that always took place immediately after the close of the dinner, she asked reluctantly if the Bosnian would remain. She could not speak of the man to Count Balsic without a sense of falseness intolerable to her native honesty.

"He must, for another week, if he chooses," was the answer. "I have given him permission to stay."

This inability to conceive altering a promise given stirred the girl to mingled security and exasperation. Her distaste for the man from Sarájevo had no weight with the castle's master? Very well, then, let him take the result of whatever Michael's agent planned for her rescue. But,

how safely confidence was placed with Stefan Balsic!

That first shock of dread in reading Michael's letter, the linking of his menace to Count Balsic with his sending the Bosnian here, Delight had long since dismissed. Her heart had apologized to Michael for the suspicion that would embrace murder. Had he not written that he was himself bringing "the one answer" which she guessed to be death? That meant warfare, a duel even, here where the old codes still prevailed, but not assassination. No, the Bosnian was here to effect her escape.

She did not intend to go with him. She would not give Stefan Balsic the right to bend upon her his blighting contempt. But she waited eagerly for Rupert.

Someone else also waited. The day after the Bosnian's stay was decided, Irenya startled her companion.

"The noble American does not come, Countess Délice," she sighed.

Delight contemplated, amazed, the demure young person who sat with her yellow-satin head bent over the inevitable embroidery, a yellow-satin braid crossing each shoulder and brushing the floor on either side.

"How did you know that he was to return, Irenya?"

"Certainly because he told me, Countess Délice."

"Told you?"

"But yes."

"Why? How did he come to meet you?"

"He came to meet you, Countess Délice," corrected Irenya naïvely. "But he met me, too. He said, this was Jack Rupert of New York where gold was in spots; I said, this was Irenya Ivanovna Lesendra. We had met."

"Would Captain Lesendra like that?"

"Why should he not, Countess Délice?"

Delight paused for consideration. She felt maternal; by contrast with this ingénue she was experienced and wordly-wise. And she thought she knew Jack Rupert. For the present, she decided to ignore Danilo Lesendra.

"Mr. Rupert is a peculiar man," she began cautiously. "I mean, he is in a peculiar position. I doubt if he will ever marry, certainly not for years. I have heard him say that no man who leads his life has the right to marry; he has watched the wives of some of his companions, I think."

"What is then the life of Mr. Rupert?"

"He was for years mechanician for three famous automobile racers in succession. When young Corrie Rose gave up racing to please his father, the company put Mr. Rupert in his place.

And recently he has gone in for aviation, also. You have seen aeroplanes?"

"In pictures, Countess Délice."

"Well, he flies those machines. And because he lives all his life on the edge of death, and will not live otherwise, I think he will never marry."

"All men live close to death," replied the Montenegrin placidly. "If our men had not married because of that, Countess Délice, there would be no people in Crnagora. But I am glad Mr. Rupert will not take a wife."

"Why, Irenya?"

"Because Lord Stefan has arranged that I am to marry Danilo Lesendra."

The American gasped.

"Irenya, you do not love Captain Lesendra?"

"I love no man, Countess Délice. I shall marry him."

"Then, why do you watch for Mr. Rupert's return?"

The girl smiled, glancing sideways with her long, blue eyes narrowed in mirth and the kitten-look touching all her expression.

"He is so small!" she declared irrelevantly; and would not continue the discussion.

Had she brought new trouble to Danilo Lesendra, Delight wondered uneasily? He did not love Irenya, but he expected household peace with her. Suppose the girl's fancy went questing after

the indifferent American, while she married her cousin? Before, Delight had pitied only Irenya in this marriage of convenience; now she thought of Lesendra. He was so young, even younger than Michael; was it fair to bind him? Was it so sure that he would never know love except for Stefan Balsic? "God will send the beggar a jewel to give"—would Lesendra spend all the years to come in searching for that supreme gift of gratitude?

How many men paid such debts at all, or at best but perfunctorily? Delight fell to musing of her own account with a prick of shame and futile regret. To how many she owed, not gratitude for mere justice, but gratitude for love, for guardianship, for tenderness of thought and pleasures given! She remembered how she had left her uncle and aunt at Tours, deserted them secretly, leaving a bare statement that she was going to marry the man she loved. Did they not love her; deserve better of her than that? No wonder they opposed her marriage to Michael, if they had heard the false reports of him which reached her here. Not loving him, they believed, as did Count Balsic and Danilo Lesendra—the girl shivered with a chill doubt. Did no one except herself believe Michael worthy of trust? Back across her heart flowed the sickness of dread with which she had listened to Lesendra's own story as it seemed to draw one man's figure against the sordid background of

treachery and avarice. The portrait had failed, according to Lesendra's word. What if he had not told her the truth? While she struggled against the thought as if it were a physical oppression, there came to Delight's hearing a faint dragging sound, the swish of soft material brushing stone. She recognized the shuffle of the Bosnian's slippered feet past her door; as if there were no wall between she saw the man glide through the castle, his half-lowered eyes like darkened glass behind which crept unseen things, his step whispering under cover of the Montenegrins' frank, martial tread as he stole about his secret errands.

Gasping for breath, Delight stood up.

"Irenya," she urged feverishly, "Irenya, sing to me—tell me a story. I do not want to think!"

Irenya smiled with her unsurprised amiability.

"Certainly, Countess Délice. I will sing the ballad of the great Prince Ivan, who gathered the men of Crnagora in the valley and swore them to guard the Black Mountain's freedom themselves, with their children and children's children, forever. And the oath has been kept. I know the songs of Mirko Petrovitch, and the legend of Iskanderbeg. But *he* was an Albanian, although a Christian as we."

The American sat down again, but not near the outer door. She did not want to hear the footfall of the man from Sarájevo. She chose one of

the divans on the opposite side of the room, and rested her aching head on the cushions.

Irenya's voice was a deep contralto; not the amber-clear voice of opera, but that other contralto which is roughened too musically for hoarseness, yet suggests the thickened tones of passion or grief. To hear her sing was like discovering a second personality, so little did her music accord with the visible Irenya. The melodies were wild, yet simple and touching as all folk-songs that lie at the heart of a people. To Delight the heart was audible in them, beating like a pulse. But to-day the music did not quiet her; instead, it was like a cry in her ears.

The song ended abruptly with a sudden clatter and excitement in the courtyard below. A messenger had ridden in; Delight heard voices repeating the phrase she had learned to recognize as Stefan Balsic's title, and the stamp of a horse's hoofs upon the stone pavement. Irenya ran to the balcony, and the American slowly followed in time to glimpse a swarthy giant whose face was gray with dust and wet with heat and haste, as he slipped from his horse and entered the castle.

"I will sing again, Countess Délice."

"Not now, thank you, dear. We will rest a while. And another time I will tell you stories, in return."

Irenya put the other girl's hand to her lips and heart with a pretty grace.

"I shall listen with my heart. But not stories, please; rather would I hear of automobiles which race together, and those machines which fly like birds in the air."

Delight said nothing; in fact, she found nothing worth replying. The situation seemed to have slipped from her hands. Presently she turned and went back to her divan. Count Balsic had sent to her all the French and English novels the castle afforded; selecting one at random, she engaged herself in reading.

The book was not a novel. It was old, very old; an eighteenth-century edition of Théroulde's *Chanson de Roland.* The romance of hero and paladin, Saracen conquest and legendary queens, with its recurring "*Dieu nous garde*" devoutly closing each verse, snared the girl's interest. It was an hour later that she awoke to the unprecedented sound of a man's step and voice on her balcony, and Irenya's answering tones. As she rose, dropping the forgotten book, Danilo Lesendra entered her sitting-room.

Not the Danilo Lesendra who had talked to her beside the cataract. With her first glance at the officer, Delight saw the change that had swept friendliness from his eyes and straightened his

unsmiling lips. It was an enemy who looked at her, a judge hard as youth.

"Captain Lesendra?" she uttered, stupefied.

He saluted her with his unvarying formality.

"Madame! I offer the apology of necessity for this intrusion. Believe me, only bitter need could bring me here."

"What has happened?"

"Only what you wish and have arranged, madame. The King's men will be here within an hour."

"I arranged? How could I—a prisoner?"

"And the Bosnian, Countess?"

He had touched her. Delight paled and flushed.

"I did not bring him here," she retorted, but there was no spirit in it.

"No; he was sent to you. And by him and your fellow-countryman Rupert you have supplied Michael Balsic with that which his greed covets: the ruin of Count Stefan."

"I? No!"

"You have brought charge against him of abducting you for his own purposes. He cannot defend himself or state the motives which justified him, without publishing Michael's dishonor. That he will not do. He chooses himself to bear the charge of lawlessness, rather than have the stain of treason black on the old name for all time. He

will not have that shame fixed to his house before never-forgetting Crnagora."

"After all, he did take me by force," she flashed out of her bewilderment and dismay. "That charge is true, whoever brings it."

He met her angry, frightened eyes, his own eyes dark with immeasurable scorn and weariness.

"Madame, if you had brought only the charge that was true, it would have been warfare, so honest. But you have charged falsely also."

"I have not charged at all," she protested, stung to defense. "Captain Lesendra, if Lieutenant Balsic has appealed to the law of this country for my rescue, am I to blame? I never asked him to do so. It was not with that message I sent Mr. Rupert to him."

"You sent the Bosnian."

"No!"

He looked at her. His glance said what his lips would not; that she lied. Now she remembered how he had seen her communicating by signs with the man from Sarájevo, and had seen her send Irenya down with her message; remembered also that never since had Lesendra met her except formally and when they were not alone. He had suspected Michael's emissary, then, and her. He classed her with the woman who had intrigued to his own boyhood's ruin.

"You will not believe me?" she answered his

silence. Tears of anger and mortification gathered to her eyes, pride forcing them back before they fell. "You will not? Then let my friends set me free! I can do nothing. When I am gone to America, your Montenegro will forget me in a month. Your King loves Count Balsic; he will pass by this."

"He would, if Count Balsic obeyed him," said Lesendra.

His accent struck her. Delight caught the edge of the table beside her, bruising her soft fingers with the unconscious force of her grip.

"What—do you mean?"

"That the Balsics are ill to drive. Count Stefan declares no woman he has called his shall be taken from his tame hands. Pride has gone mad in him. He will set you free in his own time, but he will defy Nikolas and carry you into Russia before he bends his head to Michael and suffers you to be taken."

Her head fell back; dumb, she gazed at him. All her knowledge of Stefan Balsic failed and became ignorance before this new side of the noble she had fancied steel-cold and passionless except in love of country. Now, rather than stoop pride to submission he would defy his king, throw down the fragments of his career, and go out an exile. The thing was impossible, grotesque in its folly.

Lesendra had not finished. When her confusion

cleared, the girl read purpose in the strong young face.

"What will you do?" she asked faintly. "You mean to do something—what?"

"I mean to do what he should do, and has forbidden," said Lesendra. "I mean to take you by force, madame, to where the King's envoy will not find you. Without your witness, there is no proof. And while I have the time thus gained, I will so close the net around Michael Balsic that he shall never again venture in Montenegro's court."

"Take me—"

"I have said it. You must come with me, Countess. I shall place you with some decent peasants."

"Do you think Count Balsic will deceive the King's envoy? Because I am not here, will he deny that he took me?"

"He will not see the King's envoy. Since you are gone, he must do as I wish and ride into the hills on some pretended errand. He will not meet those men with the admission that you are his wife, and are not in his house. I know him. He will ride after you, and the visitors will come and go in his absence."

"He will never forgive you!" she cried.

"He never will," Lesendra answered. "But he will be saved."

The girl looked at the man whose age was so

close to her own, and saw a boy, the boy who dreamed dreams. Abruptly, thought of self, anger and angry pride were swallowed by a great compassion that carried her to his side, most womanly tender in her pity.

"You would do that? You would make that your gift—to give him up forever! Oh, do you love him so well and know him so little? He would not shrink away and hide from the King's men; he would face them alone, without me, without you. He would meet the same ruin, but without you beside him; never to share it with him. And—it is not needed, Danilo. I am not what you think; I will bring no ruin, only I will go away."

She had clasped both hands upon his arm in her eagerness. Neither then noticed that she had called him by the name Stefan Balsic used, as if adopting their kinship by the strange marriage. Checked, Lesendra gazed down into the lovely, sensitive face and candid eyes.

"Madame, if you were honest, God would have made an angel," he said, his voice hoarsened, and turned away his head.

Her hands slipped from his arm.

"You do not trust me?"

"I trusted one woman, madame."

"Captain Lesendra, I sent no message by the Bosnian. The only message I sent by Rupert is one Count Balsic knows. I have brought no false

charges against anyone. Will you not believe me?"

He did not answer. And finding that he would not, Delight flung down her final defiance.

"Very well. I can say no more. But I will not go with you to cause your destruction."

"I shall take you, madame."

There were two doors from the tower into the main castle, fitted into the one doorway. One, opening inward, was a massive affair designed for the old days of defense. The other swung out, and was lightly built of panelled wood and gilt, installed by the Russian princess as a less ponderous barrier for daily use. Through this frailer door Delight had distinguished the Bosnian's trailing step. Now, as she drew back before the entire certainty that Danilo Lesendra meant what he said and had arranged to carry out his plan, the girl caught the echo of another passer-by's voice, through the same thin panels.

There was but one in the castle who spoke like that. Before her companion understood her intent, Delight was at the door and held the knob in her grasp.

"Count Balsic is out there," she announced, triumph painting her cheeks and lips. "I shall call out to him."

He had not counted on the master's presence there. She read so much in the white change of his

expression. And because he was not thinking of himself at all, she thought for him.

"Why will you not see that you are wrong?" she reproached exasperatedly. "You never ran away from a danger, I am sure—I *know*. Why should you force that on him? Captain Lesendra, it would be the end—"

The sentence broke; someone had knocked on the door.

As if magically evoked from air by the summons, Irenya was at once in the room, proceeding demurely toward the door. But Delight ran to Lesendra.

"Say good-by to me," she urged, her eyes on the stormy darkness of his. "Go out as he comes in, as if you had visited me. I will say I called you from the balcony."

"Why?"

"Will you quarrel with him when he needs you?"

She had found the only argument to move him to the pretence. He bowed to her, while Irenya opened the door, then saluted Count Balsic and passed out after the other man entered.

If Stefan Balsic was surprised to find Lesendra there, he made no sign.

"I fancied I heard you call my name," he said, in explanation of his own presence. "If so, I am at your service."

"Thank you," Delight murmured, and then strengthened her voice with an effort at ease. "You are very good. But I only spoke of you to Captain Lesendra. I had called him from the balcony—to ask him about a book."

There was a silence. Delight had not looked at her visitor, keeping her gaze resolutely upon the hands folded in her lap. She understood nothing. Lesendra's statements and accusation had presented a confused picture in which she could recognize neither herself nor the others. But she knew she had lost Lesendra's friendship; and knew, with wonder at herself, that not even freedom with Michael could content her if she must meet in Stefan Balsic's expression what she had met in his officer's. These two men who should have been her enemies, how had they wrought upon her so that she desired their respect above all things? She had deserved it, yet lost it.

"What did Danilo say to you, madame?"

"I—about the book?"

At last she lifted her gaze to the man opposite. Stefan Balsic was watching her, but in his quiet face was no trace of the look she dreaded. As she met his regard, quite helplessly unable to screen her own, his gray eyes cleared to a smile.

"You are very inexpert at deception," he told her. "What did Danilo come here to say to you? No, not about the book."

There are grades in deception. Delight reached one, and stood before Danilo Lesendra with that protective art in which a woman is most artful.

"He did not have time to tell me," she evaded. "At least, not so that I could understand. We are friends; I was sorry he was deeply troubled."

"He told you that we are to have guests, perhaps. Play hostess at my table to-night, madame. Believe me, you will not find it dull. Your own friends will be there as well as mine."

A wild fancy seized her, sending her flush high.

"Not—?" she uttered.

"Michael? No. When he sits at my table, in my house, it will be because I am dead, and also Danilo who is my heir. And even then the estate goes to the Crown, unless Nikolas refuses it."

"How you hate him!" her indignation flared. "Can you not say, unless he is proved honorable?"

"Why, yes," returned Count Balsic, with infinite irony. "I can safely say that."

"Are you generous to speak that way to me?"

"I accept the reproach," he said, after an instant. "No. You perhaps saw a messenger arrive, an hour past?"

"Yes."

"He brought a letter. It is in French, because written by a Russian; perhaps a part of it may have interest for you."

He separated the first and last page from the

letter with the care of one safeguarding another's confidence, and handed the girl only the middle sheet. Wondering, Delight took the paper.

The writing was very foreign; fine and fastidious in its perfection, yet not always easy to decipher, as if written in haste or agitation. It began abruptly, in the middle of a sentence:

> —" for we have been friends long, Stefan, nor have I ever lacked your good word. So I warn you, now. Your brother demands justice before king and court, declaring that you took the lady by violence for no better reason than the well-known enmity between you and your desire to deprive him of his promised wife. He demands your punishment for unlawfully carrying on a feud, and that the lady be sent back to her family. She has appealed to him, it seems, for relief from cruel imprisonment and harsh usage, begging him to take her out of your hands at any cost. She has written to him that she is ill and suffering from your treatment."

The letter fluttered from Delight's hands.

"I never did!" she cried, fire-hot with shame and outraged pride. " Count Balsic, you must believe me—you must. I never wrote or said those things. I never asked your brother to take me from here, except by proving his own honor so that I

might be free. Oh, I did not tell those falsehoods!"

"I know you did not."

The tranquil answer stilled her excitement almost with a shock, so unexpected was it.

"You know? How can you know?"

He smiled.

"How? As I know moonlight will not blacken what it falls upon. And, Michael and I are old in warfare; I feel his touch in the sword-play."

She sank back into her chair, covering her face. This time she had no defense for her lover. After a pause, Count Balsic lifted the letter from where it had fallen.

"Will you continue your reading, madame?"

Delight let fall her hands; there was a strangeness deeper than distress in the large, clear eyes she fixed on him. She understood Lesendra, now, and she searched Stefan Balsic's face for evidence of that madness of defiance the officer declared to be his intention.

The face baffled her; she felt more than she saw. She took the letter.

> "So at last he beat down laughter—for at first his tale won no belief—and the Prince, wearied and overborne, promised to send a messenger to your castle that it might be seen if there was such a lady, and the story heard from her. Nor would he have gained so much

if he had not as companion an American, who confirms him so far as to say a Mademoiselle Warren is your wife against her will. Michael swears he will bring the United States government about our ears if you are not brought to account and the Countess returned to her country and friends.

"It is a hard glove to draw on, I know, Stefan. Yet if there is truth in the matter, take warning and learn a new virtue: submit. Even Count Balsic cannot fight the Powers, and though the king loves you he will not provoke the Americans and English, to shelter you in a wrong. We have both the Russian blood that recognizes no law higher—"

The sentence ran off the page. Delight let fall the letter to her lap, again fixing her gaze on the man opposite.

"You have come to tell me what I shall do?" she asked, quietly as he had spoken.

"No."

"You have the right to defend yourself against what is not true."

"I ask no woman's aid in my course." A glint like an unsheathed blade flashed in the gray eyes, and was gone. "Whether Stefan Balsic stands or falls is his affair, and only his. Bid Danilo Lesendra remember that, if he seeks you again."

"Then, why did you show me this?"

He rose.

"Because it was my fancy. You are prepared for the visit; use it as you will. But do not set your heart too firmly on joining Michael at once. It is an uncertain world, madame."

The irony was in his voice again. And Delight knew Lesendra was right, not unwisely desperate. She held out the letter.

"You leave me free to act, Count Balsic?"

He took the page from her and twisted it with those he held, then struck a match and touched flame to paper. When he held but charred cinder, he let that fall and set his boot-heel upon it, crushing ash to powder.

"Quite free," he answered.

She returned his parting salute and he went out.

After a while Irenya came to stand beside Delight's chair, affectionately anxious and puzzled by the last hour's happenings.

"Countess Délice, you are troubled?"

"No," denied Delight, not moving.

"Is Lord Stefan angry, Countess Délice?"

"No."

The girl cast about for a new subject.

"The Bosnian has angered my lord. There will be no more of his gusla. He is gone."

Delight sat up, aroused to heed of what her companion was saying.

"Gone? Already? How did it happen?"

"I do not know well. But early this morning, in the dawn, one of the soldiers found him creeping into the castle by a way which is forbidden. He had been out all night, which is also forbidden. Danilo Lesendra would have had him locked up, I heard, but Lord Stefan passed that way at the moment and said no. The Bosnian was turned out to go—after Petrovitch had taught him respect in language."

"Petrovitch?"

Irenya's eyes laughed through their lashes.

"The man you call the giant, Countess Délice, because he must stoop his head to enter a door. As Lord Stefan went away, the Bosnian cursed him. Thus—" she wrung her dimpled fingers illustratively, "—Petrovitch would have twisted off Reshid's head, had not my lord looked back and seen. 'He is not a Montenegrin, Petro; do not kill him, beat him,' he bade. And Danilo laughed, gave his own riding-whip to Petrovitch and followed Lord Stefan within. I know, for old Draga saw and told me when she brought our coffee."

Pale, Delight stared at the girl as if seeing in her eyes the drama enacted. She could no more realize that side of the gentle, gay Lesendra than she could identify the Michael Balsic this country was showing her. The man from Sarájevo—what had he thought in his dark, secret heart, how had

he borne the punishment? Had he crept away—her memory awoke.

"Irenya, he is in the castle now!"

The cry startled Irenya's smile away, at once to return.

"Oh no, Countess Délice! He is gone."

"I heard his step. An hour ago he passed this door. There is no one else who treads like that. He is in the castle, he is!"

"That is not a thing which could be," remonstrated Irenya soothingly, even with condescension. "It is even a folly. Look at the madness which alone could send Reshid back, Countess Délice; and look also at the fact that he would not be allowed to enter."

"I heard him; before you sang to me."

"You were deceived by another sound, of a certainty. Petrovitch thrust him out, while all looked on, and he went down the road, far, far. He will never be here again; it is over. Shall I dress you that you may be ready to dine, now?"

The suggestion sent the Bosnian from Delight's attention. To dine—the dinner at which Stefan Balsic had bidden her play hostess; where his life came to so strange a halt and poised, a lofty column ready to fall at a blow from the weak hand of an alien girl. A girl for whom he cared nothing. who had run blindly into his scheme of events,

tangling and tearing all as she went until he put out his hand and stopped her by force.

He would not use force now to save himself; he had used it before to save his country and the honor of a name. And because of that forbearance which left her free, she was to be Michael's instrument in his ruin; Michael's, who had lied. She thrust the ugly word away from her, but it clamored at her ear. She tried to summon her lover's ardent, smiling image to contradict the voice, but by a trick of the memory Danilo Lesendra's face came instead with its haunting likeness to Michael. How Lesendra had looked at her—as he had looked at the Frenchwoman in Antivari!

Abruptly Delight dragged the pins from her hair, tumbling the thick, bright masses about her in her haste.

"Yes, dress me, Irenya! Open the wardrobes; choose what is finest and best. It is growing late. Hurry, Irenya, hurry."

CHAPTER XI

The Silver Cup

The King's envoy did not come heralded, nor in any form suggested by that title reminiscent of the romance and pageantry of other days. Near five o'clock an automobile scudded up the long, mountain road as lightly as a wind-drifted leaf. Jack Rupert was the machine's driver. Beside him sat an eagle-featured, gaunt-framed old man; proclaimed soldier in every line and movement, even when wrapped in the nondescript shapelessness of a motor-coat. But the uniform in which he had fought and met the wound that crippled him was not the Montenegrin; Sir Robert Owen was English and England's representative in the Black Mountain country, although the emissary of Crnagora's king in this instance.

There was no one else. When the automobile rolled into the courtyard and stopped, the castle had received its guests and faced its downfall.

Danilo Lesendra came out to meet them, as one who had long known both; giving Sir Robert his arm to aid descent from the car, and passing the cane made necessary by the old soldier's lameness.

"I have added rheumatism, my boy," Sir Robert acknowledged the service with a nod. "Be happy you're still young, Lesendra."

"I should be more happy, General, if I knew my age would show such scars as yours," the officer answered, with a sincerity that gave the compliment worth. "Count Balsic has been told of your arrival, sir, and will be waiting to welcome you." He exchanged a hand-clasp with Rupert. "I was sorry to miss your visit, last time."

Rupert gave him a long look, not hastening his reply. It was impossible that the American should not be struck anew by the dignified order of this household in contrast with that of Michael Balsic. Moreover, he was sensitive to that intangible difference called atmosphere, that aura of a house.

"Yes," he finally responded. "I'm busy regretting that, myself. It ain't to be denied it was a bad miss."

There was a significance in the leisurely remark that Lesendra did not lose.

"We may remedy it now?" he suggested.

Rupert drew off his gauntlets, his dark brows knitting with his peculiar expression of discontent.

"I knew a man who used to build fancy green pellets sold in a filigree pewter box. He advertised that his remedy would cure anyone who hadn't been buried yet; but it did the most good to people who didn't need it."

"Very clever," smiled Sir Robert, who was by no means happy in his errand, and willing to accept diversion. "Only, if they needed none, why did they take it, Mr. Rupert?"

"They didn't," said Rupert, and followed Lesendra's gesture toward the castle.

Count Balsic met his guests with the serenity of one to whom there was nothing unusual in the visit. No one could have guessed that he knew of the embassy's hostile intent; indeed, his knowledge was not suspected. Refreshments were brought, including neither the black coffee nor white brandy with which hospitality had persecuted the American.

"It is pleasant to receive friends in our lonely mountains," the host said, when the group separated to prepare for dinner. "Sir Robert, we can promise you game; one of my men shot a bear, to-day. We shall meet in an hour?"

"Ah—thank you," answered Sir Robert, at less ease than usual. "There was a time when I shot my own bears, sir. Shall we," he glanced toward the impassive Rupert as in quest of aid, "shall we have the honor of being presented to the Countess, later?"

"Certainly; she will meet our first guests at dinner," Count Balsic replied. "Danilo, you will come with me; I have directions to give you for to-morrow."

Lesendra obeyed in silence. Rupert, eyeing him keenly, surprised in his face what he failed to read in Stefan Balsic's. In one glance toward his chief, the young officer had betrayed to the watching eyes his bitter anxiety and suspense, his passion of jealous dread for his kinsman. But Sir Robert's expression brightened to a semblance of cheer at finding himself spared the awkwardness of demanding an interview with the imprisoned lady. Moreover, the manner of the assent argued a different situation from that he had been led to expect; and he was Count Balsic's friend.

The servant who conducted the visitors to their room neglected to suit his pace to the lame man's steps. The way led up a staircase which dusk had already rendered obscure, and Rupert kept beside his companion to render unobtrusive guidance. The two men, unlike at almost every point of comparison, had taken a dry liking to each other during their day's journey together. Half-way up, the stairs turned an angle. As they turned this corner, both men halted in a common impulse of surprise. A dark shadow had slipped past them among the shadows of the stone arches, silently as shadows move. There was not the rustle of a garment to give it identity as human, or an outline to be distinguished.

"By Jove, if we were in India I should say it was a native!" ejaculated the soldier, peering into

the confusing vista of dim light and shade, then turning to stare at his companion. "Or—your eyes are younger than mine, Mr. Rupert—did I see anything?"

"I ain't prepared to say," was the reply. "But I saw it, too. We're having a séance at the same time."

"It might have been a dog—?" doubtfully.

"Commencing with 'might' as a chassis, I ain't limiting the number of bodies you can fit on a guess," admitted Rupert, without enthusiasm. "Not being my house, I'll run on upstairs without calling for help. If it's a dog, I like cats."

The implied advice was sound. Sir Robert accepted his companion's arm and they followed their guide. The servant had already discovered his mistake and was returning toward them. The lamp he carried was not unwelcome. That gliding shadow had left an odd sense of discomfort and uncanniness in its wake.

"You—ah—know the lady," Sir Robert observed confidentially, detaining the New Yorker at the door of his room, when they had reached the upper hall. "Do you fancy she will be apt to—well, cry, or faint?"

Rupert looked at him.

"Not unless she's changed," he signified, his mouth grim. "If she has, I'll be liable to change some myself."

Curiosity was stronger than fatigue or nervousness. Before the end of the hour fixed, Sir Robert issued from his room. In the hall he joined Jack Rupert, and they went down together.

Almost at the same moment Delight left the door of her tower. As usual, Count Balsic met her and they walked side by side to the central room that was half salon, half hall. Here they paused, but the girl found voice to protest, herself scarcely knowing why.

"Let us go on, to the dining-room, please. It is so open here—there are so many doors." She glanced around the large, many-arched space.

He looked down at her with a certain astonishment. This mood was new to him, as indeed to her. But he complied without question. Lesendra was already there and held back the curtains for their entrance.

"Go meet our guests, Danilo," Count Balsic directed. "Bring them here."

Lesendra bowed and went on the mission. From his dress Delight read that he was to dine with them also, and she was glad. The composure of these two men steadied her own. Among all things, she was determined to hold that. She had had time to think, and she suffered acute humiliation from the aspect in which she had been presented to this foreign court. She was angry with Michael, with Rupert, with all the world before which she

had been dragged in a publicity which she detested. Even Stefan Balsic had taken thought to spare her, a stranger, mortification.

She had no time to speak to her companion, if she had wished. Almost at once Lesendra ushered in the two visitors.

Dinner was an elaborate and formal affair at the castle. Not of Montenegro had Count Balsic learned his way of life, nor altogether in Paris or London; the medieval richness of old Russia was native here also. But it was not at the sheen of tinted crystal, the copper-gold of samovar or silver lustre of candelabra and fruit-piled vases, that the King's envoy halted to gaze; it was at the girl who stood beside Stefan Balsic. He could not know she had come there just before his entrance, and the picture was of a united household; soft candle-light shining on the waiting table, mute servants in the background, and master and mistress tranquilly waiting together.

"Sir Robert Owen, let me present you to my wife," said the host, the last word slightly accented as if its use was deliberate. "Mr. Rupert, you need no introduction."

"You are very welcome to a house in the wilderness, Sir Robert," Delight spoke in her turn, carefully natural. "The solitary places have their charm, but a friend is doubly pleasant to receive."

The old man stood quite still, looking at her;

and Rupert looked at them both. Excitement colored Delight's cheeks and lips and burnished the bronze of her large eyes. Irenya had done her part; no dinner-table on the Continent could have shown a more conventional hostess than this lady whose pale-gold gown seemed to gather and hold the light in its folds, whose bright hair was banded with a string of brilliants that suggested the coronet Stefan Balsic had given her the right to wear. Here was no sign of the dishevelled captive of romance.

"Countess!" Sir Robert stammered, for once at a loss. "Countess—"

He could proceed no farther. Count Balsic came to his relief with the practised tact that had governed many a trying situation, and left Delight free to give her hand to Rupert. She could not meet the New Yorker's acute black eyes, so anomalous did she feel her position, remembering their last interview. Rupert said no more than she, and presently tenseness was lessened by the taking of places at the table.

It was a round table; by an impulse strange to herself, akin to her vague fear in the hall, Delight passed by Lesendra and took the seat beside Count Balsic.

"Let us not be formal, Sir Robert," she apologized to the guest of honor, inviting him to the chair at her other side with the pretty imperious-

ness of the old-time Delight. "We are too far from formal places."

"Countess, so that I am not deprived of my neighborhood to you, I am contented," returned the soldier, gallantry stronger than surprise.

Delight smiled her thanks, not venturing to look at Stefan Balsic or hazard a conjecture as to his thoughts. She saw Lesendra seat himself on his chief's left, and knew his eyes, still dark with storm, were fixed upon her. She felt the exhilaration of one who dominates, in spite of her inward tumult and pain. She had vanquished Danilo, who had meant to prevent her presence here; she held in her small, pink palm the future of Count Balsic, who "asked no woman's aid."

The travelers were hungry, and there was no invitation to heroic drama in the bearing of the girl they had come to rescue. Yet Sir Robert hesitated before the fragrant plate set in front of him by one of the Albanians; oppressed by his mission and sorely puzzled as to his course. While he paused, the cool voice of Rupert filled the blank, answering a question of Lesendra's.

"I ain't denying I've seen districts where the motoring was duller. No, we didn't have any trouble coming up; only,—some of the hurrying crowds dropped something I found."

"What was that?" the host inquired.

"Only a knife. It wasn't more than a foot long

and lengthwise of the road, so it only split two tires all around the rim. I've picked a few things out of tires, after road-practice, and I've found dogs in the running-gear and chickens Maryland against the radiator, but this is my first trial at collecting swords."

Every one smiled. Immeasurably relieved by a diversion that compelled naturalness, Sir Robert fumbled for his spoon, and dinner was under way.

The conversation between the men was light and general; of motoring and politics, and the likelihood of war between the Porte and the Balkans. Delight did not speak unless directly addressed, and found herself no more able to eat than was Lesendra. Moment by moment she was conscious that the time of explanation and conflict drew nearer. A new apprehension seized her; what if the Englishman should wait until she had withdrawn to take up the purpose of his visit? He might do so, with masculine abhorrence of feminine emotion. How would Stefan Baltic's overmastering pride answer the examination, or the fiery Lesendra endure hearing it? She would not go; she would claim the Continental custom and remain! Her waning courage flamed up.

The dinner moved on quietly until near its close. Well-fed, Sir Robert grew a trifle drowsy and lulled into inaction after the day's long ride. He began to meditate the chances of leaving serious

investigation until morning. Lesendra sat playing with a wineglass, abstractedly intent as if he watched some scene in the amber-filled crystal. It was Rupert who first saw the change in Delight's expression. Startled into attention, he leaned forward.

Count Balsic was speaking and observed nothing, as the girl beside him drew herself erect in her seat, her lips parted, her brown eyes dilating, her slender fingers tightening on the arms of her chair while she gazed across the room. Doubt, fear, and utter horror struggled over her face, from which all color had receded. The American turned to trace her glance, and found she was looking at the curtained door of entrance.

One of the Albanian servants was coming across the room, carrying a salver on which stood five vase-like goblets, four of translucent china set in gold, one of silver, containing the coffee that was to conclude the meal. There was no one else, nothing to provoke that frozen terror. Perplexed, Rupert turned back, to see that now Lesendra had caught sight of the girl's expression and was half rising.

"You will try our Turkish coffee," Count Balsic broke his discourse to give courteous invitation, taking the silver goblet from the tray, which had been brought first to him.

The cup was in his hand when Delight started

from her place, striking the goblet aside so fiercely that it escaped his grasp and fell crashing to the floor.

"No! No!" she cried, her clear voice ringing through the room. "You must not drink—you shall not! Oh God—if I had not seen!"

The men rose simultaneously, Lesendra flinging his chair aside with a second crash. Delight stood swaying, her hands still outstretched, her head flung back.

"Madame, what is this?" demanded Count Balsic.

"The coffee," she panted. "The man at the door poured something in the cup."

"This man?"

Unintelligible though the English words were to him, the action and the master's glance needed no translation for the Albanian. He sank to his knees in desperate protest of innocence.

"Not he," Delight came to his aid. "The man beyond the curtain."

"Wait, Danilo. Madame, you did not recognize the man?"

"I—the place was shadowed." She shrank from the gray eyes that sheered so deep.

"You wish to say no more to me?"

If he should think her an accomplice, whose courage had failed at the actual deed! The mere thought scorched her like near flame.

"The Bosnian," she uttered with difficulty, and covered her face.

Lesendra sprang to the door, and was gone. Outside, the castle woke to tumult as he passed.

Count Balsic put his arm about the trembling girl and placed her in her chair. Rupert had already stooped and recovered the silver goblet. It was very deep; at least a third of its contents still remained when he set it upon the table.

"I guess there are times when minding a man's business ain't the best thing he can do," he remarked. "Sir Robert and I ran into a man on the stairs who went by as if he usually wrote his name alias."

"Slipped through like a Hindoo," supplemented Sir Robert. "In the shadows, you know. Do you fancy the brute was up to poisoning you, Balsic?"

"Perhaps not," allowed Count Balsic, with a suspicion of sarcasm. "If not, he seems to have taken a singular and dangerous way of flavoring my cup." He looked down at the still kneeling Albanian, and briefly commanded him to rise. "There is no reason for detaining this boy, madame?"

The girl shook her head.

"No. The tray was on the little serving-table," she answered. "While it was left there for an instant, the—the man crept out of the

shadows and poured from a vial into the silver cup. I—could barely see—"

"Thank you," he checked the difficult recital. "As to its poisonous character, Sir Robert, we will have the coffee tested. Mr. Rupert, will you give the goblet to Iskander?"

"As far as I go, it ain't in any need of a try-out," Rupert signified, delicately smelling the liquid before complying. "Unless Turkish coffee has peach-kernels in it."

"How could the man know which cup you would take?" questioned the Englishman, not sharing the understanding which the other two men had exchanged in a glance.

Count Balsic motioned the Albanian to remove the cup, adding a brief direction before turning to his guest.

"I beg your pardon, Sir Robert. An old promise makes me choose this cup and no others use it. The man has been in my house long enough to learn that fact and make use of it. Ha!"

A single shot had rung out, oddly muffled, and echoed back and forth through the stone rooms and halls. Delight uttered a low cry and again hid her face as if to shut out sight and hearing. The guests looked at each other, and at their host. No one doubted the meaning of the report; not the fusillade of pursuit, nor the random fire of a quest,

but the single shot of certainty. Lesendra had found.

Count Balsic took a cigarette and lighted it, and the soldier followed his example.

"The man was from Sarájevo; I had him punished for a breach of discipline, this morning, and this was his retort," the Montenegrin observed indifferently. "No man of Crnagora, however deadly the vendetta, would dream of such a weapon nor of its use in such a place. Did you know, Mr. Rupert, that no violence can be done in a woman's presence, in our rough country? Even the arrest of a criminal cannot be made before his wife. What more chivalrous land can allege as much? But enough of this subject! A disorderly household you will think I keep—I offer my apologies for this scene. I have ordered fresh coffee. Madame, are you well enough to remain with us, or would you prefer to retire until to-morrow? Our friends will still be here, then."

Delight lifted her head. She was very pale, and profoundly shaken by the knowledge that her word had condemned a man to death, even a death so well-deserved as the Bosnian's. But she met Count Balsic's eyes firmly.

"Thank you. I will stay," she answered, and leaned back in her cushioned chair.

She comprehended that he had spoken to shield Michael's name; that he believed his brother guilty

of plotting the cowardly crime with the Bosnian. Since Lesendra knew the man to be Michael's agent, of course his chief also knew. She refused to believe it, blaming all on the man from Sarájevo and his fury at the punishment inflicted, but she could not wonder at Stefan Balsic's conviction. And she was passionately grateful to him for holding her above all suspicion even of communication with his enemy.

There was a long pause. Danilo Lesendra, correct and gentle in bearing as usual, came into the room and resumed his place at the table, after bowing courteous salute to his fellow-diners. The servants brought fresh coffee, and retired at a gesture by the master. Sir Robert sat musing, troubled and uncertain. Delight lay in her chair, waiting, as she knew Count Balsic waited for the purpose of the visit to arrive. Rupert, after passing Lesendra the cigarettes, contemplated his friend with an interest tinged with sardonic humor and speculation.

"Countess," the Englishman at last said, abrupt in his distaste for his task, "you saved your husband's life, just now. May I ask whether you acted as a Christian or a wife?"

The color poured into the girl's face, giving back all the vividness of her beauty. Dismayed in spite of her expectation of being examined and startled by the form of the demand, she glanced

hurriedly at Count Balsic, then looked back to the envoy.

"That is a strange question, sir," she demurred.

"Strange and discourteous, I know. Yet I would ask it."

"As both, then," she answered with dignity.

"I have been told that you have reason to hate and fear him. That is not true?"

This time Stefan Balsic met the girl's regard, his unsmiling eyes absolutely calm.

"You choose a curious subject for discussion in my house, Sir Robert," he commented. "Yet let me not restrain you; if you desire more freedom with my wife, I will leave you together."

"Stay," the old man urged earnestly. "Count Balsic, I seem to repay your hospitality with insult, yet I was chosen to come here on this errand because I am your friend. I confess I am here as an envoy; for what I say I am not myself to blame. There has been grave deception practised on your king, unless much lies beneath the surface of your household. Stay, but let me beg the Countess to reply to questions not put willingly or wilfully."

"Answer him, madame."

"Yes, sir," complied Delight steadily and gravely.

"You do not hate and fear Count Balsic?"

"No."

"He does not secretly compel this answer?"

"No."

Sir Robert drew a breath, half wonder, half relief. Rupert offered no assistance; like Lesendra, he listened with the impassivity of one from whom interference would be impertinence. Both were there as witnesses, no more.

"Countess, Lieutenant Michael Balsic has brought to Cetinje a story that you were on your way to marry him, when Count Balsic abducted you and forced you to become his wife against your will. He brought Mr. Rupert as a witness to your captivity. He told the King that you secretly wrote to him, imploring him for rescue, since you were cruelly and harshly used, your husband venting on you the feud-enmity toward his brother which had moved him to take you from the road. He said," with an uneasy glance toward the stately noble who listened with unstirred face, "that as a rebellious prisoner, you were made to suffer—"

Delight stopped him by rising to her feet, scarlet with shame and anger.

"Do I look so?" she challenged. "Do I look such a spiritless creature that I would be here now if I were treated so? Do you see in me the traces of cruelty and harshness?" She stretched wide her white arms, standing a glittering figure in the candlelight. "Let me give justice where it is due! As you see me now, so I am every day. As

Count Balsic treats me in your presence, so he treats me when alone. And grant me justice also —I, since my marriage, have sent no message to any man of which my husband does not know. But—"

Sir Robert had risen as she rose, and faced her across the table, fixed in attention. Delight looked toward Rupert, then let her hands fall to her sides, her flush of excitement dying out.

"But—much of the rest is true. I was engaged to Lieutenant Balsic and was on my way to become his wife, when Count Balsic took and married me; yes, by force. He will not tell you his reason for that violence. I know it, and it was not for feud or cruelty. I—" she faltered for an instant, "I believe he was mistaken in that reason. But, thinking as he did and does, I say he acted honorably and justly. Lieutenant Balsic and Mr. Rupert have been misinformed; I believe by the man who died to-night. I have not asked defence, and need none."

"Countess, I am empowered to take you back to Cetinje with me."

"For what?" she asked simply.

"To undo what has been done by violence," Sir Robert pronounced; he hesitated, a faint red creeping into his fine, weatherbeaten old face. "That you may return to your friends in America;

where you can—ah—have your marriage set aside —in short, by divorce."

The word out, he reddened still more. It is not an agreeable thing to discuss a man's divorce at his own dining table, with his wife. It is probable Sir Robert had never been more embarrassed or more distressedly wished himself elsewhere. He was not helped by glimpsing the cynical appreciation that lifted the corner of Rupert's lip. Neither guest would have been much astonished if Stefan Balsic had turned them out of his house, or even ordered the willing Lesendra to have them sent down the mountainside. But Count Balsic made no sign.

Delight, too, winced before the crudity. But her view-point was very different from that of the men; her emotion was largely resentment of the intrusion forced into her affairs.

"My friends in America will hear from me when I am ready to return," she stated, in her clear tones of displeasure. "When the time comes that we are awaiting every day, when another doubt is settled, Count Balsic has already promised to set me free in that manner. There is no need for two governments to concern themselves with the matter."

Sir Robert rested his hand heavily on the table, overturning a glass in his awkwardness of preoccupation, astounded eyes seeking his host.

"You, you proposed that?" he stammered, tongue tripping, confounded. "You will consent —concede—"

Count Balsic lifted his cold gray glance, silencing the other man as effectually as if the words had been struck from his lips.

"As you have heard," he said.

Conscious vaguely of some inner meaning she did not grasp, somehow abashed, Delight wound her fingers into her scarf, drawing the lace about her bare shoulders as she sank into her chair and veiled her eyes behind their lashes. She felt suddenly weak and unnerved, on the verge of panic or tears. What had she done? Refused freedom and placed herself at the mercy of her husband, the answer leaped at her. She had denied all men, even Michael, to shelter this enemy and trust all to his generosity. Was she Delight Warren, or some wild, quixotic creature of romance?

Sir Robert sat down also. But first he bowed ceremoniously to Stefan Balsic, and again the girl felt the act acknowledged something she did not understand.

"I am an old man, yet have much to learn," he rejoined. "I am to carry this answer to the King, Countess?"

"Pray say that Lieutenant Balsic was deceived by a servant who carried false tales," she answered, steadfast in the course she had adopted. Indeed,

it was too late for retraction now, had she been weak enough to desire it. "I thank you and the King, but ask you, things being as they are, to let all be. Count Balsic can best govern this affair and I am content with his decision."

Her words ran ahead of her thoughts, but when she had heard them, she recognized them as truth. She had no fear of the justice of Stefan Balsic, or desire for other guardianship until this drama was played out.

"I am heartily glad of this end," Sir Robert made reply, presently. He was still agitated and fumbled for his cane. "I hope good may come of evil, in all things. Count, if you can forgive me this ungracious errand, we will rest here to-night and ride back to-morrow."

"I am not forgiving, but the errand was not yours," Count Balsic returned, his composure still perfect. "I remember, not who brought it, but who sent it. What now, Danilo?"

The Albanian had approached Lesendra with a whispered report.

"The dog that drank the coffee is dead, sir," the officer translated.

"Very well. You spoke, madame?"

"I—no!" Delight rose hurriedly. "I will go to my rooms, please, if all is over. I am tired, very tired!"

The evening was ended. No one was anxious to

continue a situation so strained. The Englishman saluted his hostess with old-fashioned deference. To Rupert she gave her hand with a glance that besought indulgence.

"You will not go without seeing me again," she asked hurriedly. "I have much to tell you—to explain."

"Mr. Rupert is not a diplomat," Count Balsic intervened. "No state duties calling him, let us hope he will stay in the castle for a time."

Rupert's black eyes met the gray ones in a long regard that interchanged many thoughts.

"Thanks," the New Yorker accepted, carefully casual. "If you ask me, I ain't denying it's a pleasure. I have some explaining to do, myself."

Delight's scarf had slipped to the ground, unnoticed, as she left the table. When she turned to the door, Lesendra was waiting to give her the lace.

She had regained his friendship, surely! The recollection came to her with a warm thrill of wistful eagerness, a return of the singular tenderness and compassion she felt for the young officer. Involuntarily she leaned toward him.

She saw Danilo Lesendra's eyes wet like a girl's. And as she put out her hand to take the scarf, he bent his fair head and kissed her fingers. It was more than an apology; it was an allegiance.

As on so many evenings, Delight and Stefan

Balsic walked side by side to the door of the tower. There they stopped; he looking down at the girl, his own face stirred like storm-swept water.

"You are more generous than wise," he said brusquely. "You should have confirmed Michael's story and asked to be taken to Cetinje. My answer would have set you free, either by law or bullet, as he planned."

"You would not have let me go," she asserted, too weary for argument. She drooped with a flexing of her supple young body, outlined in the lighted doorway.

"You knew that?"

"I felt it. Your pride— It does not matter; I have no better place to go, yet."

The thought of Michael was like a third presence to them both. For the first time Stefan Balsic's self-control failed before the girl.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded, almost with roughness. "What do you hope to do?"

She met the challenge fairly, flashing flint-spark to his steel.

"I mean that I do not believe Michael guilty of slander and murder. It was the Bosnian who carried him false messages from me; no doubt to get payment offered for news of me. It was the Bosnian who tried to kill you to-night; because you had him shamed and punished this dawn. You are

wrong in all you believe of Michael; wrong, wrong! But because you believe so, I will not marry him until your own investigations have proved him innocent. Until then, I will stay in your house. I will not ruin you by trying to leave it; for you would not give me up even to the King."

"No, never! Not if I had to carry you into Russia, an outlaw. No man takes from me a woman I call mine."

His stern vehemence beat down hers and made it puny. Over-awed and shrinking from what she had herself evoked, Delight swayed, finding no reply.

In the pause, a deep-belled clock in the tower struck, slowly counting up to ten. When it lapsed into silence, the girl spoke:

"But you will let me go."

"Why, yes, when you ask me," Count Balsic answered, with his usual coldness; doubly cold after the heat of a moment before. "You are a child, madame; you should have let me drink from the silver cup."

CHAPTER XII

Lesendra Rides

Next morning Sir Robert Owen drove back to Cetinje. He did not return in the American's motor-car, but in Count Balsic's limousine, conducted by that Servian chauffeur who had brought the Frenchwoman to the port of Antivari. He went with better grace than he had arrived, after a short interview with the girl he had come to rescue and renewed apologies to his imperturbable host. He had seen Delight in her tower, in the fancifully luxurious rooms of the Russian princess and attended by the smiling Irenya; the picture he carried away was not that painted by Michael.

Jack Rupert watched the Englishman drive down the road, then strolled around an angle of the castle, after passing a cursory glance over his own automobile where it stood in the courtyard. He recalled the broad balcony where he had before met Delight and Irenya, and intended to fix its location.

It was a dazzling morning; the castle on its aerial perch seemed to float in an atmosphere of pale, translucent blue powdered with particles of fine gold. A pure air stirred across the gigantic bosom of the hills, warm in the sun. As Rupert

walked on, the music of falling water came across the silence. He had not found the balcony, but he had found the arcade. And the arcade contained its usual morning occupant; he came between the columns upon Danilo Lesendra, engaged in cleaning his pistol.

At sound of a step, the officer glanced up with his flashing smile and the two men nodded greeting.

"Getting ready early," Rupert commented on the other's occupation, with grim reference to the night before. "I guess I've cruelly misunderstood you, Lesendra; I used to think in New York you had a sweet disposition."

"You have a saying in your language about eternal vigilance being the price of certain things," Lesendra countered, laughter in his eyes. "I am being vigilant, *mon ami*."

"Well, I rather supposed you'd be busy holding the funeral of one of the things, this morning," remarked Rupert, sitting down on the railing and swinging one foot in its tan boot and legging. "What?"

Lesendra had uttered a sharp exclamation of warning at his movement.

"Have you looked over your shoulder?"

Rupert glanced down into the sheer gulf, and flicked a speck from his sleeve over the precipice.

"Oh! I've been higher than upstairs before now, thanks. In fact, you've been there yourself.

I guess I don't feel one of my real nervous attacks coming on."

There was admiration in Lesendra's look at the small, wiry American. But he only acknowledged the point with a gesture, and laid the revolver on his scarlet-clad knee while he offered his companion a cigarette and himself lighted one.

"Funerals," he observed, throwing away the match, "are of different kinds, dear Rupert. When I have mine, I should like a heap of stones out on the Karst, as well as any. But mountain or plain, I would turn to dust of Crnagora."

"I raced an automobile hearse all up Broadway, one day," mused the other. "The mourners were following in two big limousines and trying to look as if they didn't enjoy the run. I was driving a ninety-horse-power racing machine, but they beat me out because they didn't worry about breaking the speed limits; no Irish policeman would break up a funeral to arrest its chauffeur. Besides, it would hurt feelings to bring the occasion up in court. I guess that's my idea of a good finish—speeding up the main street in my home town. And if it comes to turning to dust, I'll settle on a cornice of Times Square. But it's most likely someone will sweep up what's left after the accident and put me in a cigarbox. Now, our friend of last night—"

"What do you wish to know about him?" Lesendra asked bluntly.

"I want to know whether he is dead."

"Why?"

"I ain't denying that sudden death don't come my way as an after-dinner cabaret-show so often that I'm blasé about it yet."

Lesendra gave the other a searching regard. Rupert met it coolly, and then both men smiled.

"You pay a poor compliment to my marksmanship," said Lesendra. "Since you are interested, he is assuredly dead. I shot him as he was making his escape through the window by which he no doubt had entered. He had a rope down which to slide; naturally, under the circumstances, his body fell into the cataract below and was sucked into the subterranean current. It will be better not to mention that to the Countess; the walk by the cataract is a favorite of hers, and ladies are sensitive."

"You ain't troubled that way?"—drily.

Surprise swept the officer's expression.

"I? For executing that creeping assassin? Rupert," he held out his hand, the strong, finely-modelled hand that was of one type with Stefan Balsic's, and Michael's also, "if I had failed to kill him, by intent, do you think I would see my hand clean of red? No, I would see it black for my black treachery to my kinsman that let his would-be murderer live, unfit to clasp yours and worthy Count Balsic's striking down if I should offer it to him. Am I a priest or a woman, that you ask me that?" His chest rose with a swift-

drawn breath. "And when I find the man who sent the Bosnian, I will deal with him also."

"Do you know who he is?"

"If I do, he is out of my reach."

Rupert turned the unlighted cigarette in his fingers. He was looking at Danilo Lesendra, but the face he saw was that of Michael Balsic when he told the American he had sent a safe messenger to Miss Warren: "a man from Sarájevo."

"Your Bosnian talked?" he questioned, his drawl slightly accentuated.

The reply was oblique.

"How far might a man travel in the mountains before he found prussic acid?"

"You got the smell, too?"

"Count Balsic did."

The sound that interrupted response was light as the fall of a leaf. Around the corner stepped Irenya, her gay blue and gold attire glittering in the sun, her yellow braids swinging in the morning breeze, her blue-black eyes demure behind their fringing lashes.

Lesendra greeted the girl pleasantly, with a phrase of the soft, unintelligible Servian. But Rupert came to his feet in one lithe movement, baring his head as he advanced.

"Good morning," he saluted her, with the cordiality he considered due all women, appreciative black eyes on the brilliant little figure of his former meeting.

Irenya bowed to Lesendra, murmuring a "*Hvala—dobro,*" of acknowledgment. Still more demurely, but with a side-glance of malicious coquetry, she laid her hand in Rupert's.

"How do you do?" she answered, graciously sweet. "It is that we are honored by your kindness and most happy to see you. The Countess Délice has sent me to say that she will receive you with much pleasure."

"I'm sure obliged. Can I go back with you, Miss Lesendra?"

"If you so please, excellency."

"I please, all right!" He turned to the officer. "Excuse me, Lesendra; I guess I have orders to report elsewhere, just now."

Lesendra bowed acquiescence; but he changed his position to watch the pair as they walked away, Rupert still carrying his cap, the girl's head level with his dark one and swaying like a yellow flower. There was not anger in Lesendra's gaze, or jealousy, but a surprise and amusement tinged with perplexity.

It was not a great distance to Delight's balcony, where she waited. But Irenya walked slowly, and her companion suited his pace to hers. He was intent on many things, and she on him.

"As you said, you have come back," the girl ventured, finally. "Certainly I told the Countess Délice it would be so."

"It's a pretty safe risk that I'll do what I say, unless there's an accident on the track," he asserted, with the absence of one whose thoughts are busy. "But I ain't sure I didn't make a fierce bad mistake in coming the first time."

"Why, excellency?"

Rupert was silent, unconsciously pausing beside the stone balustrade. Irenya stopped beside him, wondering and expectant.

"I ain't qualified for an expert in sentiment," he avowed. "Ladies haven't figured in my experience except when they didn't suffer any doubts about what—or who, they wanted. But—are you guessing your Countess Délice is bearing up well against being here?"

"The first week she was pale, and shed tears. Now, she is pink, and smiles often," pronounced Irenya sagely. "We walk; twice we have taken the carriage to drive, with Danilo. She has many books, and I teach her to make flowers on silk, and we talk. Also, she puts on a beautiful dress of silk every night and goes to take the dinner opposite Lord Stefan. Why, then, should she not be happy here?"

Rupert nodded slowly.

"All right. Is your Blue Book posted any on Lieutenant Michael Balsic?"

"I do not know that book." She glanced over her shoulder, and moved nearer confidentially.

"But Lord Stefan's brother is not like my lord. In his house things happen which are not to be repeated. The Countess Délice believes he is good; but we others, we know."

"I've met people with ways I liked better, myself," he gloomily assented. "And it's been down in my score-card, watching the game, that love puts out commonsense."

"You are not then married, excellency?"

"I'm running alone, and meaning to keep on that way to the finish."

"Never having felt that love which is not sensible?"

The liquid voice was a snare to confidence. Without reason, his gaze on the sun-drenched expanses, the reticent Rupert spoke of that which he had never before put into words.

"I ain't supposing New York is a place to travel all day without passing anything but men. And I've had enough money to spend—by risking my neck for it—until I can't get a starving insurance agent to notice me—and that draws some kinds of society you don't know anything about. But I guess I never had time for any more trouble than came in my regular line of work; I never hunted any more. Then—"

There was a pause, unbroken by the girl. A huge Siberian hound, Lesendra's possession and in quest of him, came down the arcade and stopped

beside the pair. Irenya the animal disregarded, fixing its attention on the stranger. Quite naturally Rupert dropped his hand on the great head as if in accustomed caress, pulling the dog's ears while he spoke:

"I had a friend; well, he owned the factory that I belonged to, but he raced his own cars and I was his mechanician. He got badly smashed when our car turned turtle on him, once; and nursing him, I got mixed into his second smash, over a lady. It finished right. At his wedding, where everyone was kissing the bride, the little lady walked up to me. It was pretty much like touching a rose. A queen, she was, white, with a man's-size idea of whiteness! No, I guess I've never been in love—she spoiled me for the kind of women I could get."

"What did that lady look like?"

"She was a beauty, with a lot of yellow hair fine as silk."

"Like mine?"

He looked at her from a new stand-point.

"Why, I'm ready to say it was; only you've got more of it than anyone except the pictures on the Save-It-Quick bottles. She had blue eyes like yours, too. But I never saw Mrs. Gerard in that kind of clothes."

"You do not like my dress?"—plaintively.

He recovered.

"It's pretty as a chorus costume on the White Way. But we'd better be keeping that date! Here, Rick—" he looked down at the dog.

"His name is called Bodino," corrected Irenya. "He is unsafe to touch unless when Danilo bids him be still. Excellency is rash."

"I'm waiting for a demonstration," said Rupert.

Indeed, the hound accepted the American's final caress with a dignified thumping of its tail on the stone pavement, even following a few paces as he moved away.

Delight was not impatient for the interview which promised so much embarrassment. She did not understand herself; how, then, could she hope to be understood by Jack Rupert? How could she reconcile her action of the night before with her speech at his former visit? Moreover, she still resented the interference, however kindly meant, which had forced her into a position so difficult.

But embarrassment could not long continue before Rupert's matter-of-fact naturalness. They shook hands and sat down opposite each other. Irenya retired out of hearing, taking up the never-failing embroidery.

"I have much to explain to you," Delight went to the core of the matter. "Last night, you must have thought me ungrateful to refuse your help. But—you know I did not ask you to help me that

way! You know I never told you those things. They were not true. And I was angry."

"I ain't surprised," said Rupert calmly. "I was vexed fierce, myself, when I found how things were going in Cetinje."

"You gave my message to Lieutenant Balsic? You told him—?"

"I reported all you said. He knew it already."

As Stefan Balsic had told her! Delight put her hand over her heart. Why was faith in Michael made so hard, she rebelled passionately? Why was his enemy proved right in every trivial circumstance, when so wrong in the conclusion reached? And Michael told her nothing; she had no weapon for his defense, only the blank shield of trust.

"He said—only that he knew?"

Rupert did not look at her; he understood what she hoped to hear, and what he could not answer.

"He said Lesendra had better look out for himself."

Lesendra? Astonishment loomed above pain. What had the loyal Danilo to do with this ugly tangle? Against what should he be on guard? She felt bewildered. While she hesitated, at loss, Rupert again took up speech.

"When I saw Lieutenant Balsic, he asked me to drive him to Cetinje. I did. He said you ought to be set free by law; he wasn't pleased by your way of waiting for Count Balsic to clear up

the graft case. He said you needed publicity, as the papers write it. We put in an evening's real work getting up a hot headliner account for the yellow journals in New York. He made out a wave of popular feeling would wash all over the United States and spill enough into Montenegro to drown the wicked. I ain't denying he was right; he put in all the cruelty talk Owen recited last night."

Delight sprang up, the bright morning blackening before her eyes.

"Oh no!" she cried piteously. "No! No! How could he? How could you? To be read by everyone—to be pitied and laughed at and discussed—I can never go home! I will die here, first. Oh, you were cruel, cruel!" She covered her face; seeing herself in that place of pillory, the last sensation. She pictured the flaring extras on "The Warren Case;" her wild flight to Michael featured as a new romance; imaginary portrayals of her sufferings at the hands of Stefan Balsic.

Rupert had put his hand into his breast-pocket.

"Here is all he wrote. He gave the bunch to me to have cabled over, as being more used to newspapers and signing a name they'd remember flirting with before. I remember being real cordial about it. But I guess I forgot to send it."

The girl dropped her hands, eager gaze on the big envelope he held.

"You kept the story back?" she panted, afraid to believe. "It is here?"

"It ain't any other place," said Rupert, and gave her the envelope.

She seized it in shaking fingers and tore the packet across, across again, until she had shredded the paper into fragments. The reaction from humiliated shame left her dumb. But she held out her hand to Rupert with a glance that said what she had no words to express.

"Lieutenant Balsic was deceived by the messenger he sent for news of me," she declared, after many moments of silence. "I—I suppose he did not know how a woman would feel, about the published story. Men are so different."

Her eyes begged him for confirmation of the excuse; and begged vainly. Rupert's next remark was not a reply.

"I'm going to train in this camp for a while. If things get where you don't like them, here, I ain't supposing you'll have to walk back to town. I'll be where you can signal for me, any time."

He rose, with the evident intention of withdrawing. Though somewhat surprised by the suddenness of his going, the girl made no effort to detain him.

"You are so good!" she said, her face warm with gratitude as she leaned toward him. "Yes—if you can, please stay. It will not be long; I am quite sure it will not be long before Lieutenant

Balsic is cleared of this horrible charge. I think he must know it will not be long, or else he would have explained to me. And forgive me for sending you on a fruitless errand, and for not going with Sir Robert and you, last night."

"I don't remember grieving specially about either," said Rupert, unexpectedly.

"You want me to stay?" with amazement.

He evaded the pitfall.

"It's a habit of mine to drive slow on a crooked road. I ain't able to say I enjoy being a witness to what I don't see."

Delight looked at him, and abruptly turned away. She knew her hope had failed, and not in this man either had Michael a supporter.

"Thank you," she dismissed him, her voice chilled.

The American stopped to salute Irenya, on his way out. She rose to answer him, lifting her blue eyes to his face with the look aslant, the kitten-look that made her prettiness most delicately and quaintly unusual.

"You are to me as if I were, too, a great lady," she sighed. "And certainly I am kin to the Princess Marya Feodorovna, who is dead, and to Lord Stefan, and my father was of great honor in Crnagora. Will you be always so to me?"

"Were you supposing I was liable to start something different?"

"Would all men of your country be so to me?"

"They would, Miss Lesendra, if they wanted to live."

"Would you then kill them?"

"By the dozen," said Rupert, without a smile.

Irenya tilted her chin, cream-white throat curving like a bird's; her long, almond eyes half shut and gleaming mischief.

"Thank you, excellency. For those other men I do not care, while you are so."

Lesendra was still in the arcade, when Rupert came down the twisting stairs from the balcony, but he was no longer alone. He was standing, leaning against a column and smoking one of his scented Russian cigarettes while he listened to Stefan Balsic, who sat opposite on the broad stone bench. Both men had the air of being engaged in serious discussion, but Lesendra's expression was singularly happy, even gay, and once he laughed out boyishly. His eyes were still shining when he turned to the approaching American with a pleasant gesture of invitation.

"You are desired to say good-morning, Mr. Rupert," he declared, with the formality he never quite laid aside in the presence of his kinsman.

Rupert came up very willingly; it accorded with his own plans to meet Stefan Balsic in this manner.

"It's a pleasure to say," he greeted his host.

"I'd like to say a few more remarks, too; but they haven't got any 'good' in front of them."

"We will hope the good may follow, then," returned Count Balsic. "Sit down, Mr. Rupert. Last night I met neutrality when I might have met enmity; this morning we may go farther. You have passed the time since your last visit with Lieutenant Balsic, I think."

Rupert nodded, declining a chair in favor of his chosen seat on the balustrade. His self-possession equalled that of the noble, as they studied each other.

"I drove him to Cetinje, and didn't lose him there," drily answered the American. "I ain't denying a simple, open-hearted town like New York don't train a man up to this kind of work."

"You perhaps return better disposed toward me?"

The answer was indirect, and slow in coming.

"I might have got the relief expedition here ten days ago, if I'd hurried bad."

The two Montenegrins were swift in perception; neither needed a more explicit response. Ten days before, would Delight have elected to stay in the castle? Without the past fortnight's experience with her husband, would she have chosen his guardianship until she could go with honor? If Rupert had said that he wished to keep his countrywoman from marrying Michael, the statement would have been no plainer.

"There's been considerable said about my being a witness," Rupert presently added; he looked off across the mountains, drawing his dark brows together. "I ain't troubled with a weak memory, and all I remember being witness to was that Miss—the Countess was here, after starting out to marry someone different. I guess I've spent duller times than the last ten days; being several laps behind on all the Servian language and having to catch up by interpreter. I like to know what I'm saying. That's why the King picked Sir Robert for my team-mate."

"You saw the King?" Lesendra exclaimed.

"And liked him. I told him this could be run better without Mr. Michael Balsic, so he kept him in town."

"I can give you the assurance, Mr. Rupert, that you have done better for madame than you yet realize," Count Balsic said quietly. "You have seen what I would conceal from the world; there is no reason why I should not say to you that she is not one to marry dishonor. Or, if she chooses to do so, let her at least choose open-eyed. You visited Balsic village?"

"I visited it a little more than I enjoyed. I didn't like the population any. There was a made-in-Germany Italian that the Lieutenant said he brought from Servia, a man called Josef—"

Lesendra started erect with an abruptness that halted the narrator; his eyes flashed to his chief.

"An Austrian," corrected Count Balsic.

Rupert accepted the information with a nod, and made no attempt to finish his remark. He understood that to both Lesendra and Stefan Balsic there was a startling significance in the presence of the man Josef in Michael's house. He did not interrupt the silence that followed, knowing that in the thoughts of the two kinsmen he had no part.

Danilo Lesendra's voice ended the pause, with a phrase in the strange, softly guttural language:

"*Dozvolite mi—Visosti!*"

Stefan Balsic rose and laid his hand on the officer's shoulder, looking down into the ardent face and steady, loyal eyes. Perhaps he saw more deeply than he had ever before cared to penetrate, measuring not the service, but the devotion that offered it. Faint surprise stirred the grave coldness of his face, and vague doubt that was not of Lesendra, but of himself.

"Go," he accorded the request, and hesitated.

For the first time in this house Rupert witnessed the old Montenegrin salute from man to man; Count Balsic stooped and kissed his young kinsman's cheek. But the American could not know it was also for the first time in Danilo Lesendra's life.

In the courtyard below, Rupert rejoined

Lesendra, a few moments later. Count Balsic had retired to his own rooms immediately after the officer's departure.

"It ain't according to my hand-book on etiquette to leave without saying something," observed Rupert, impersonally disapproving. "I'm here to recite my half: good luck!"

Lesendra laughed, gripping the offered hand. He was flushed; his blue-black eyes were at once fire-bright and very soft. He had the appearance of one profoundly and happily excited.

"Thank you," he acknowledged. "Listen, Rupert; when I return—from no pleasant errand! —there will follow an end to all this turmoil and ugly work. Our army is purchasing two aeroplanes—I shall ask to be appointed for aerial service, and you shall go on with our Long Island lessons. It will be good to have sport instead of intrigue!" He drew a deep breath of the mountain air. "Good-by, *mon ami.*"

Rupert, detained the hand in his, checking the departure. Comprehending the American had more in mind than the compliments of leave-taking, Lesendra flung his arm across the neck of his horse and waited, one foot in the stirrup and his fair head thrown back against the animal's wind-tossed black mane.

"When they held the Paris to Rome endurance flight, I was picked out as having yellow streaks,

for the only time," drawled the aviator. "It occurred to somebody that he could make a pot of money by paying me to throw down my people by queering my machine and quitting early in the race. The man forgot to tell me his name—maybe I didn't give him time. But I identified him without taking any thumb-prints when I met Mr. Michael Balsic. I ain't denying I may be prejudiced about him. I just want to let you know, if you're entering against him, that he ain't specially likely to keep racing rules in the game and his notion of a straight line is the hole bored by a corkscrew."

Lesendra smiled, no shadow in his glance.

"I will tell you something, Rupert. Long ago Michael struck me, to the heart. I have a superstition: the last blow will be mine."

"It ain't demonstrated that the next one will be the last," was the brief retort. "There's room between for trouble without contradicting the fortune-teller any."

The horse plunged with impatient fretting to be off. Lesendra swung himself into the saddle with a last gay salute, and was gone. Rupert walked to the gate and watched the officer gallop down the road, a glittering point of color and movement against the vast gray hills.

CHAPTER XIII

For Irenya

Life at the castle fell into a new routine which included Jack Rupert instead of Danilo Lesendra. For the days slipped past, soft-footed and sunshine-garbed, but Lesendra did not return.

Of all the castle, perhaps Delight most missed him. Count Balsic was not given to soft emotions. Irenya's attitude was of placid indifference to her fiancé's existence. But the American girl had given and received friendship, and in the moment of understanding found her friend sent from her. Lesendra gave her what no one else could, in companionship. There was none of the constraint she felt with Stefan Balsic, in that memory of their relationship which no tact could dispel. He had the mentality and sophistication Irenya lacked, and the class equality failing which Rupert failed to meet her at many points. Yes, she missed Danilo, and strolled daily in the arcade, hoping to see the smiling officer come between the columns. They were what the Romance languages term *simpática.*

She never knew why Jack Rupert had a decided aversion to seeing her in her favorite seat beside the cataract. Delight herself sometimes thought

of the Bosnian she had seen there, but with an indifference that rather astonished her. She had sentenced the man to death by her evidence, had heard the shot that carried out the sentence, yet she was haunted by no remorseful pity. She had felt no recoil from Lesendra, when that gentle-eyed young executioner had returned from his duty done to smoke and sip café noir at her table. Was she growing hard, was Crnagora changing her very fibre? She did not know, but she continued to pass tranquil hours beside the waterfall.

Rupert's ideas regarding the Bosnian were no more tender or sentimental than Delight's. His repugnance was for the uncanny, subterranean disappearance of the water, and an uneasy doubt as to its retention of its prey. He expressed this doubt to Irenya, one day when they stood near the boiling swirling pool.

"I ain't borrowing misery, as a rule, but she won't enjoy it if your man from Sarájevo gets coughed up by a back-draft, some time."

"That is impossible," reassured Irenya, sedately. "What the water takes, it keeps, excellency."

Irenya during these days was living in excitement,—the excitement of free intercourse with a man, and that man the amazing American. Oddly enough, Rupert had never been undeceived as to his mistake of the first visit; he still believed Irenya

the sister of Danilo Lesendra. Chance had not brought forward their relation, nor corrected the error born of their identity of name. He found the Montenegrin beauty an agreeable companion who met him on a level. And Irenya, serene in the knowledge that Countess Délice was always at hand, if unheeding, expanded from bud to blossom in the sun of masculine attention.

Altogether, it was a tranquil week at the castle. On its last evening, while dressing Delight for dinner, Irenya advanced a proposition that rouged her cheeks and brightened her eyes to sapphire.

"Countess Délice, Mr. Rupert has offered to take me for a drive to-morrow in that automobile. Will it be permitted that I go?"

Delight paused, caught unprepared. However Western her own views, she knew that nowhere in Europe could a young girl go out with a man, unchaperoned. Irenya Lesendra was not a peasant, to claim rustic simplicity. Yet her eager hope and suspense were hard to disappoint.

"Why do you not ask Count Balsic, dear?" the American evaded.

"Countess Délice! I should not presume."

"Why not? He is not so appalling a person. I have always seen him speak kindly to you."

"But he said you were my mistress. If you consent, all will be well. Since you threw down the silver cup that would have poisoned Lord

Stefan, you have great honor in the castle, Countess Délice; for we all know that you are not his enemy as was whispered at first. What you say will be accepted."

"What would Captain Lesendra think, Irenya?"

The yellow head tossed.

"I am not yet wed to Danilo Lesendra. I—do not care!"

This from the demure and submissive Irenya! Half-dismayed, half-amused, Delight drew the girl to her, searching the fair, sullen face.

"Irenya Ivanovna, what has Rupert been doing to you? What has he said to you, I wonder?"

"Nothing!" Irenya stormed suddenly, stamping her foot and flinging herself across the room. "Nothing! Nothing! That is it. I am to him a child, an old woman—what do I know? He speaks to me of machines—he will not make to me that American love. Because of that I weep and weep."

"Dear, is it possible you love Rupert?"

"No! He is small, he is black, he is ugly—I hate him! But I would have him love *me*. He does not. He never will; he is a stone."

The utter femininity of it brought Delight to blended laughter and sister-sympathy. She followed Irenya across the room and sat down on the divan upon which the girl had cast herself. A

touch of mild malice toward the self-sufficient Rupert moved herself. There is something irritating to women in men who can live without them. She patted the yellow braids, meditating. All parties to the game were insured from danger. She had no idea that the veteran Rupert could be snared into an affair of the heart; or that he could rival the dazzling Lesendra in Irenya's fancy. It was merely a case of pique versus indifference.

"Hush, dear, hush!" she soothed. "I will ask Count Balsic to-night if we may take the drive. Alone, I am afraid you could not go."

In a fervor of pleasure, Irenya caught the caressing hand and covered it with kisses.

"Alone? Why should I wish to go alone? With you it will be paradise, Countess Délice. I thank you with my heart—I love you."

"Irenya, my pink frock is too long. Will you turn up the hem as deep as your little finger, this evening?"

The girl sat up, her eyes wide.

"But it will not reach the ankles of you! It is perfect, that beautiful gown."

"Never mind. Please do as I ask. Now help me finish dressing."

Irenya responded to the summons with alacrity. She had never ceased to delight in that task, and had become expert in brushing and arranging the American's thick, waving tresses in bronze-hued

coils and braids. Already she had insisted on trying every combination of brilliant and ribbon Delight would permit; now she set herself to choose the most successful.

"You must look most beautiful to-night, Countess Délice. We are to please Lord Stefan. You will regard him softly, and he will think—"

"Irenya!"

"After all, you are married to him," reminded Irenya the frank.

She had nearly lost her desire. Delight went to meet Stefan Balsic with an acute self-consciousness that made asking a concession of him almost impossible.

But one does not dine with the same companion night after night without gaining a certain intimacy. Little by little Delight recovered her poise, as the meal progressed. As always, they were alone together; the night of Sir Robert's visit alone had broken the rule. When the coffee was on the table, she brought herself to the point of making the request.

"Mr. Rupert has invited Irenya to drive, in his car," she announced, in spite of herself, with some constraint. "He is an American, and saw nothing unusual in the matter. She wishes very much to go, but of course she cannot go alone. Should you object if I went with them as chaperon?

Captain Lesendra is not here to accompany us, or—"

"You are not my prisoner, but my wife," Count Balsic quietly returned. "You had no need to ask."

She looked at him quickly.

"I was—once."

"You have not been, since the night of Owen's visit."

"You would let me go away?"

He was silent for a time—playing with his cup.

"What do you want me to say?" he asked.

Delight had the sensation of being struck. She had not suspected the very masculine Stefan Balsic of so much penetration; she had not explored her own mind to the recesses his brief question had illumined with the indecent thoroughness of a searchlight. She lifted her eyes angrily, then let them fall; she dared not take up the challenge. For she did not want to go away, suddenly and clearly she saw that. She wanted to stay on this stage until the savage drama was played out; until then, America would not be home, but exile. She could not go to Michael, she would not face the peering, prying commiseration of her world as a wife who had run away from her husband. Yet, if Stefan Balsic told her she was free, pride would forbid her to stay in his house.

"You have made me your prisoner by stronger bars than metal. I have no place to go," she retorted.

"Then you told Owen the truth, not all a charitable falsehood: You are content to stay in my house?"

The question was gently put, but it rang too close an echo to her own thought. She chose to take it as an offense.

"Until I am free from this detestable marriage, yes!" she flashed out, viciously desirous to mortify in return for mortification. "Until I can claim the relief of a divorce, yes. You have left me the right to no other home, sir."

"Ah yes, the divorce," he mused. "You are very sure of claiming it soon."

Was there an inflection of biting irony in the speech? Frightened and angry, she shot her question without consideration.

"What do you mean? You promised it to me! Oh, dare you break your word—keep me?"

"Certainly not," he parried the insult, his voice silk-smooth. "The wife I should keep from sentiment would be too quaintly old-fashioned to discuss her divorce."

It was the first rough speech he had made to her. Blind with resentment and a stinging shame new to her, too inexperienced for recognition of the only spur that could drive such a man so far,

Delight sprang up, flinging back her chair and turning to the door. The articulate thought clearest in her mind was the determination never to sit at table with him again.

Before she reached the door, Count Balsic had risen and met her.

"Why are you offended?" he questioned calmly. "Our alliance is not one of sentiment, we have agreed. You have spoken to me of the man you wish to marry; why should I not speak to you of the wife I would choose?"

Checked, she stood still, catching her red lip between her teeth.

"You—you spoke as if I were—" she essayed, and stopped.

"Different from myself? Certainly; you are of the new world, I of a world very old. Why should that insult you more than me?"

She was no match in verbal fence for him, woman though she was. There was no retort at her command that would not leave her in the wrong.

"If you consider it so, I apologize," he added, when she did not speak. "Will you give me my coffee?"

Feeling the exasperation of the rebuked and out-argued, yet acute enough to realize that to persist would only aggravate her initial mistake, Delight walked back to her chair.

"It is I who should apologize," she presently said, haughtily stiff. "I have never doubted that you would keep your word in all things."

"Thank you. It is my endeavor, if not my invariable custom."

"Not—"

"Not rigidly. For example, I once told Danilo I would hang him."

Hauteur was impossible. Delight looked across the table, her delicate face like clear water over which a storm has swept.

"I know! He has told me that story. You were kind, and wise. But I did not know you had told him that. Could you have done it, ever?"

"One hangs spies."

"Your kinsman—"

"Which made all worse."

"But *could* you have done it, in the end?"

Count Balsic took a cigarette, waiting while one of the Albanians poured fresh coffee. Having successfully ended the quarrel, he hesitated in continuing the topic.

"Perhaps," he left the issue. "Madame, when a Russian is cruel, he is very cruel. When a family is as old as ours, its traits bequeathed and intensified by environment, by chronicle and tradition, by example of member to member, its children have the whisper of dead men's thoughts mingling with their own, the prompting of dead

men's passions urging their own passions, until life is a warfare between freewill and transmitted impulses. Moreover, it is a war of disguised colors; wise indeed is the man who can always distinguish from which side a message comes."

"That is horrible."

"It is heredity."

"You mean that you might have been cruel to Captain Lesendra?"

"I mean that I might have conceived it a duty to punish him; or force him to do it himself."

The girl drew a long breath.

"Instead, you believed him," she said gently. "I—I do not think your ancestors could have been very cruel."

"Not judged by the annals of some families, perhaps. You would think them so." A curious smile touched his lips as he regarded her. "My mother was dainty-limbed and delicate in beauty as yourself, madame, but she could order the knout for a disobedient serf without a change of color in her rosy cheek. I am only half Russian. The Montenegrin strikes once, and fatally, or not at all. He can be merciless; not cruel."

His calm assumption that her beauty was a fact recognized by both sent Delight's ready flush over her face. She did not answer at once. When she did speak, it was almost timidly in her care to find the words that were least likely to offend.

"Have you thought, in considering all these strange influences which you have surely studied, that they might injure another as they so nearly did Captain Lesendra? I mean, someone else might be wronged by a prejudice that seemed a duty. Suppose even the Montenegrin struck, and struck when it was not deserved? Of course you know I speak of—your brother."

"If I answer that, our peace will break again."

"No," she denied. "I may not agree, but I will know you tell me what you believe."

He was silent, and in his gray eyes she saw gather the compassion she so dreaded. But to-night there came with it a great weariness, and strange, latent emotions beyond her fathoming.

"Child, have you forgotten that my inheritance is Michael's also?" he asked, at last. "What runs in my veins and wars with me, runs and wars in him."

She had forgotten that. But the reply was at her lips before he finished.

"And you are good!" she cried in triumph. "You are loyal and honorable. You would not, could not do the things of which you accuse him."

He took no advantage of the naïve admission of her respect for him; as she had taken no notice of the name he had given her.

"You have asked the truth; I give it, then," he said. "Michael is all Russian in character, and

heredity has had its way with him, without the battle."

She wanted to protest against the judgment, to rise indignant and defend her lover or leave the man who slandered him. But somehow she did not; instead she sat quite still, gazing at the noble opposite. He looked much more the feudal autocrat and over-lord of many vassals than did the gay, Parisian Michael. She recalled how he had ordered the man from Sarájevo punished for an insolent speech, and identified the Russian princess with her eldest son. Not with the younger; Michael would never have given that order, she felt assured.

"I am quite sure you are wrong," Delight asserted, when her voice was under control. "He is not what you say. When he is ready, he will prove it so. And—I will go to my rooms now."

She did not refuse to lay her hand on his arm, and they walked together to the door of the tower, as every night.

CHAPTER XIV

The Charge

Irenya awoke her mistress from a nap, next afternoon.

"It is cool enough to go out, and we may not stay until dark," she explained, her eyes shining with anticipation. "Mr. Rupert is ready, and I am also."

Delight frankly yawned, then smiled up at the girl with a gleam of mischief.

"Oh no, Irenya! You are not ready, at all."

"Not—? But I wear my richest dress with the gold embroidery."

"Take it off," the other commanded, sitting up. "Bring the pink frock, and little hat to match. Oh, and *plenty* of hairpins!"

"Countess Délice?" beginning to glimpse a dizzying possibility.

"I am going to dress you, Irenya Ivanovna; dress you to the taste of Monsieur Rupert. For he would not concede beauty to Helen of Troy or grace to Salome unless they were costumed by Fifth Avenue. He is not prejudiced; he is merely blind. We will enlighten him. My dear, whatever shall we do with your heaps of hair?"

"It is too much?"—anxiously.

Delight was obliged to laugh, as she rose.

"Of course not, silly baby; it couldn't be! Men love hair. Unbraid it all, every bit, and sit down before the mirror. I only meant that we needed a coiffeur for the Fair One with Golden Locks."

Wide-eyed with ecstasy, Irenya obeyed. Armed with a basket of hairpins and combs, Delight attacked the billowing masses of yellow silk.

The task fully equalled expectation, in difficulty. Soon the room rang with peals of laughter, as the sheer weight of the tresses undid time after time all that amateur effort had accomplished. But the conquest was finally made, by the aid of a broad pink ribbon. Irenya was next robbed of her full petticoats and put into one of Delight's silk slips. There came a check, for the taller American was the more slenderly built.

"Irenya, it is no use. You must wear stays," Delight resigned herself.

"The garment which is stiff, Countess Délice?"

"Yes. Bring a pair from the chest and we will begin again."

This time success was attained. Delight perfected her work with the inspired detail of an artist.

Jack Rupert, standing with one trim foot on the running-board of his motor-car, and waiting

for his guests with a grim patience that argued previous experience in taking out ladies, was electrified by the sight of two Parisian clad girls emerging from the castle. One was Delight Balsic, in unobtrusive white; the other—

Irenya stepped with careful daintiness in the narrow, pink linen frock. Under the close-fitting, rose-trimmed little hat smooth puffs and coils of shining gold framed her rose-hued face. The gown was collarless, revealing the firm white column of her throat and the commencing swell of her full young bosom. There was something magnificent about her, a rich opulence of life and warmth of blood mating oddly yet harmoniously with the demure shyness that kept her close to Delight. Unable to wear the American's little shoes, Irenya had produced a pair of high-heeled, black-satin slippers inherited from her mother, and the paste buckles twinkled bravely under the looped skirt as she moved.

"Mr. Rupert, must I introduce you to Miss Lesendra?" laughed Delight, enchanted with the effect of her experiment. "Or have you perhaps forgotten your invitation?"

"I ain't able to conceal that I didn't sleep all night waiting for this," Rupert recovered himself. He contemplated the transformed Irenya with unmixed admiration and approval. "But I guess

I'd like it better yet if I was going to drive her down Broadway when matinées are letting out."

It was his highest compliment. And Irenya had not known the New Yorker for many days without learning the power to interpret it.

"Lift your skirt," Delight warned *sotto voce*, as she entered the car, with a backward glance at her joyously agitated follower.

There never was such a wonderful drive. If the roads might have been improved, they were still the best Irenya had ever traveled, while the springs and deep upholstery of the automobile afforded a comfort new and luxurious. It was a merry drive, for the Montenegrin girl put on American ease with the American gown, and Rupert responded to her mood. Amused, somewhat dismayed at the over-complete success of her plan to sooth Irenya's aggrieved vanity, Delight leaned back in her seat and for the first time in her life played the dignified role of matron and chaperon.

They had started late, owing to the exigencies of Irenya's toilet; already the sun was low and afternoon was stealing across the Karst. But Delight said nothing to curtail the drive or the others' pleasure. The exquisite air, the car's motion through the vast hills, were narcotic. She even abandoned thought, drifting with the hour.

It was Rupert who at last suggested turning

back. This distance was not great in miles, but the road was not one to traverse rapidly, with its unexpected bends and cliff-side wanderings. They were perhaps five miles from the castle, when a tire blew out with a loud double report; a crack followed by the usual duller sound of bursting rubber and escaping air. The car was running with open exhaust, at that moment, and the unmuffled noise of the motor smothered the explosion, but even so a singular quality in the first report was plain to one experienced. Rupert glanced queerly over his shoulder, as he halted the car and left his seat with the stoical patience of long custom.

"Go again?" he echoed the anxious Irenya's demand. "It's going yet. I'm changing its shoe to make it neat. But—"

"Yes, excellency?"

But his excellency busied himself at unstrapping a toolbox, grimly dumb.

The two girls descended from the machine. The car was on a narrow road that twisted around a bend, disappeared into a savage gorge, and became visible farther on as a white thread laid zigzag along the mountainside. Here a light green growth covered the land's bareness, giving a deceptive freshness and air of life to a wilderness in reality as dead and deadly as the naked rock. Delight looked about her, curious and interested.

Irenya settled upon a boulder, with much the effect of a rose dropped in the desert, and watched Rupert. The scene was flatly familiar; the American was new. With a gesture bidding the girl stay where she was, Delight slowly walked on.

The scene, commencing to gray with approaching evening, brought back vividly the night of her marriage; the night when Stefan Balsic had taken her from the road. She thought of it almost impersonally, as if that frantic, despairing girl were not herself, but another. Delight wondered now how she had been so readily terrified into a marriage. Now, she smiled as she walked, Stefan Balsic no longer terrified her; not after a month spent in his house. That is, not personally. He might be severe to men; not to women—abruptly she recalled the Frenchwoman at Antivari, with the bruised cheek.

She had rounded the turn in the road, a projecting shoulder of rock hiding her from Rupert and Irenya. As she paused before the unwelcome shock of that memory, Michael Balsic stepped down the incline and met her.

Her cry was stifled by his sharp warning. After all the months, their meeting was not that of lovers, but of conspirators standing fearfully before each other. But after a moment Delight stretched out her hands, catching her breath in a sob.

"Michael! You look so strange—so strangely at me. You know, I had no help; I was taken, Michael."

"Why did you lie to Owen?" he asked roughly.

Stupefied, she stared at him.

"Or if you told him the truth, why did you *not* lie?" He came nearer and took her hands, the bitter anger of his tone according well with his expression. "Delight, you have ruined us both. If you had confirmed my story, we should have had the world with us. If Stefan had kept you, as I well knew he would, he must have been a discredited rebel. In the end, he must have lost you and his Montenegrin possessions to me. You look at me—did you not understand, then?"

"I—"

"If you understand, and acted so, you never loved me."

She tried to free her hands, shrinking back.

"I did," she panted. "I did. Michael, Michael, can you say those things to me?"

"Yes, and think them," he answered, but more gently. "If I am rough, look at the weary lines in my face. I have suffered, while you lived at ease, it seems. Delight, you have killed my credit at court; the King turned his back on me when Sir Robert Owen made his report. More, Stefan is hounding me close in his treason-hunt. If he had

been a disobedient rebel and exile himself, could he have accused me?"

"I only told the truth!"

"It was no time for truth. But we waste our time. I love you and I forgive all. I have come for you, at last. Since you passed the other way, I have been watching to stop you on the return. Up the hill, behind that ledge, Josef is waiting with our horses. Before your American finishes searching for you and news reaches Stefan, we will be across the border of Albania. From there, we can go to America. Come."

"Michael, do you forget I am married to your brother?"

He laughed shortly.

"No; when I forget that, I will be dead. What of it? We will get a divorce in your country. I tell you, Delight," he leaned to bring his passion-flushed face nearer hers, "I would rather take you now as Stefan's wife than have this marriage first undone. He would ruin me for what he counts honor—let his own take a wound! Come, and quickly."

The girl shivered away from him, appalled dark eyes on his light-blue ones across which moved the smoky changes Rupert had seen.

"And my honor? Let me go, Michael. I cannot; let me go."

Instead, he drew her closer and passed his arm

about her; shaking off anger with a movement of his handsome head and showing her the gay, warm countenance of the lover she knew.

"Have I frightened you?" he laughed, in the old tender voice. "Forgive me, *belle amie*. See, I am gentle enough now! We have wild blood in us —I'll wager you have seen Stefan in moods not saintly? Think what fire has raged in me, to know you in his hands! Come, forgive as I do. When Owen told his story, how you had even thrown down Reshid's cup, it sent me near madness. Come; our last kiss is still on my lips."

She threw her free hand against his breast, holding him away.

"Wait. Michael, you knew the Bosnian meant to do that—and would have let him?"

The horror in her face warned him.

"I? No. I knew afterward. All that is past. Chance has played against me; if I had not bought Danilo Lesendra, I would not dare sleep in Montenegro to-night."

"Danilo?" she gasped. "Danilo—bought?"

He laughed again.

"What, that surprises you? *Belle amie*, wake to the knowledge that there are no heroes. Yes, I have found Cousin Danilo's price. I have bought him with—a woman."

"No!"

"He is bought; and Stefan tricked by his

favorite officer. If you were to see him again, I would say, give him that message. But you are not; love has found you and keeps you. Come."

He looked like Danilo. Even in the girl's sick giddiness of disillusion, that likeness between the cousins leaped out at her and she saw Lesendra mirrored in the fair, ardent face above her, as she had seen and loved the shadow of Michael in Danilo's presence. With a suddenness that took the man unaware, Delight slipped like water from his grasp and sprang back.

"I will not come," she refused. "Go alone, Michael; I will not do so wrong."

"Delight?" he cried.

"I will not go with you. Oh, do you think I have no shame? Go, please go."

Her voice broke; before the dark change in his face she turned in blind flight, afraid as she had never been afraid of Stefan Balsic.

"Rupert!" she called. "Rupert!"

Michael overtook her in two strides, catching the slight figure in his arms.

"You shall go," he promised viciously. "Be wise, *belle amie!*"

Her strength was weakness beside his; she felt herself being drawn up the slope, toward Josef and the waiting horses, toward disgrace.

"Rupert!" she cried. "Rupert! Rupert!"

She heard Irenya's answering cry, and the

snarl of the starting motor. Cool and true to his principle, the racing-driver was coming in his alter ego, his car. With an ugly exclamation, Michael freed his right hand.

"Your friend will pay, my Delight!" he warned.

It was probable that Rupert would receive the shot menaced. He was saved by the complete unexpectedness of his tactics. Around the concealed turn the gray car drove; wheeled, swerving from the road, and roared straight up the steep, boulder-strewn mountain toward the two. One glance must have shown its driver the situation; a sentence have instructed his assistant. Irenya was kneeling on the floor of the tonneau, holding the door open.

Being human, Michael recoiled from the path of the car. Beside him the great machine stopped; Rupert leaned from his seat and gripped the enemy's arm.

"I guess you've got nothing on Count Balsic, when it comes to abducting stunts," he snapped, his black eyes hard as ebony. "Drop the lady, or I'll tap you on the head with a monkey-wrench."

"And before you reach the road, Mr. Rupert of New York, Josef up there will send a rifle-bullet through you," Michael retorted, with mocking sarcasm. "You mistake the lady's coyness—am I not her chosen lover? Get back to the road, my

friend, or I will have Josef shoot you where you sit."

Rupert's answer was original as his approach. He jerked up his head in pre-arranged signal to his girl companion, and sharply pulled Michael toward him. At the same instant Irenya seized Delight and dragged her free in one fine exertion of young strength. With a backward glance to ascertain both girls were in the machine, Rupert pushed away the Montenegrin with a force that sent him reeling back from the wheels, and the car rolled down the slope.

It was neither Michael nor Josef who spared the American the bullet promised. At the moment of the automobile's retreat, a jingling train of laden mules and mountaineer riders trotted around the angle of the road, on their way to the distant markets of Podgoritza. Cries of stupefaction and consternation greeted the amazing position of the motor-car; there was a general halt and disposition to offer assistance and advice.

Rupert required neither. He maneuvred his heavy machine down the hill with nice accuracy, arriving backward on the road with an inch to spare between the wheels and the verge. He did not look toward the man he had left, nor did Michael make any sign.

Irenya had lifted the shaken, dazed girl to the seat beside her, and Delight clung to her helplessly.

Stefan Balsic's wife was conscious of but one desire, a desperate craving for the safety and shelter of the castle she had once called a prison.

"Home," she begged. "Dear Rupert, take me home."

The gray car devoured the gray road; the five miles were wound up on the flying wheels like gray silk on a spool. But twilight shadowed all the place and the castle displayed illuminated windows when Rupert drove into the courtyard.

There was more than the usual number of men in the enclosure, as if some recent event or arrival had called them together. As Rupert leaned to open the car's door, the explanation came. Danilo Lesendra advanced through the varying light and shadow to meet the party. The friend for whom Delight had watched was returned.

She lifted herself from Irenya's clasping arm to study the officer's approach, her eyes dilating and darkening. Michael had lied to her more than once that afternoon; he had not lied concerning Danilo. She had seen truth in his sneering exultation at another's fall, truth in his bitter triumph over his brother, who had trusted and been betrayed. Yet—Danilo! Danilo, who had sought the beggar's jewel, could sell his kinsman for a woman? Well, Michael had fallen from his high place; why not all other men? Why not—

He was beside the car, speaking greeting.

"Count Stefan is out," Lesendra was saying. "I have just ridden in. With your permission, madame—"

Already overwrought, outside herself, Delight recoiled from the offered hand. The face she saw was Michael's; the man she shrank from was Michael's by purchase.

"Do not touch me!" she exclaimed with vehemence. "Oh, I cannot bear it! I am ill—Not you; not you!"

Lesendra drew back as before a blow, the hand he had offered falling by his side. The girl's gesture, her tone, were plain enough; not only Irenya and Rupert, but the whole troup of witnesses stood arrested. This to Danilo Lesendra, from the gracious Delight; this public insult and condemnation? Lightly as they esteemed the judgment of women, the Montenegrins regarded each other gravely.

Rupert came to the relief of the *impasse*.

"Mr. Michael met her and put up a scare," he muttered, passing the officer.

Delight accepted the American's assistance. At Lesendra she did not look again, hurrying by with averted face. So she and Irenya entered the tower they had so merrily left. At the door she paused, gazing back to where the officer still remained, a motionless figure. She vaguely hoped that he would spring after her, show anger, pro-

test, demand an explanation—take any of the actions of an innocent man. He did not move. Very slowly she went in.

Irenya was pre-eminently practical. She asked nothing, either of the encounter with Michael or the humiliation of her betrothed kinsman. Still in the pink frock, she assumed charge of her Countess Délice as if age and position had been reversed. Delight passively submitted to being put into negligee, to having her damp hair brushed out and coiled low on her neck, and to drinking the tea prescribed. But she could not eat, and would not lie down. They compromised on a capacious armchair near the bedchamber's open window, after which Delight firmly dismissed her attendant.

"Go and rest—have your own dinner. Talk to Rupert, if you choose. Go, dear Irenya!"

"If you wish to be alone, Countess Délice, why not say that?" rebuked Irenya, without the least annoyance. "Also it would be severely improper that I should converse with Mr. Rupert at this hour. But I will eat and continue in the blue room so that I will be near when you want me."

Delight impulsively drew the girl down and kissed her.

"You shall come to America with me! Oh, my dear, my dear, if I cannot be happy, I will make you so! You do not love Danilo; say you do not."

"I do not," obeyed Danilo's fiancée placidly.

"Nevertheless, it is the good God who makes us happy, Countess Délice."

After her going, the room was very silent. The night was still, warm and windless as an Italian night. The moon was rising, floating up and blossoming against the dark like a water-flower on a black lake. There was a flowerlike fragrance in the room, but it did not come from without; it was the persisting rose perfume left by the Princess Marya Feodorovna Balsic, the ghost of roses and beauty long dead. Delight Balsic pressed her face against the silk cushions; she had beside her the ghost of dead faith. With it, she kept vigil.

Michael, and Lesendra, and her duty to Stefan Balsic—those were the themes on which her weary thoughts spoke and clamored, argued and dissented. Of the three men, one alone stood an unchanging image, one alone had not lied. And he, like herself, was cheated of his trust. The girl shivered in cold sickness as she remembered what she would have been in his eyes, at this hour, but for Rupert. No one would have known the truth of her flight with Michael; she must have seemed the wife who had gone with her lover. Count Balsic must have supposed the automobile drive planned with the intention of deceiving him.

Well, she had kept primitive honesty with her husband. Did she owe him no deeper honesty? She fought against the suggestion; she could not

tell him of Lesendra's fault, deliver the young officer to punishment and disgrace. She saw Stefan Balsic as she had seen him the night before across the dinner-table, and recognized that her thought of him on the mountain road had been wrong,—she did fear him, fear him to the heart of her. Not for herself, but for Lesendra, who had been pardoned once.

The memory of that pardon swung the giddy pendulum of her mind. Scorn of Lesendra blazed up in her, who after that had let himself be bought "with a woman." And he had affected contempt of love, lofty indifference to Irenya and her soft innocence! Were all men so poor? Suffocating, Delight rose and leaned against the window.

She looked out upon a world of jet and silver; of Titanic peaks moon-snowed to whiteness above, slopes and knees swathed in black shadows dense as plush. It must have been hours since she had sent Irenya away. She marvelled dully at the lost time, pressing her hand against her aching head. It made no difference, since Stefan Balsic was not in the castle to improve her speech or silence. Her indecision harmed no one. Where was Michael, in this gigantic landscape carved of pearl and ebony that loomed so soft and was so hard, she wondered? Could he sleep untroubled?

Just below lay the second balcony, with its double row of columns. While Delight leaned

there, she saw Danilo Lesendra pass down the arcade, the moonlight gleaming on his rich dress and fair head. He walked slowly, yet with a certain resolution and fixity of purpose. Even at that distance she saw he did not wear his sword, nor did the moon-rays strike the familiar glint of the steel and silver pistol at his belt. Where was he going, alone and unarmed, at night? The girl leaned farther out, and through the absolute hush of that hour, the roar of the cataract came to her ears.

Without a sound, with no pause for thought, Delight sprang up and fled. Across her own balcony she sped, down the twisted stairs and out on the arcade. Lesendra was no longer there. Her thin white silk dress fluttering around her, she ran between the columns, the noise of the sinister water growing like a swelling 'cello note as she advanced.

He was beside the rock where she had first sat to meet the man from Sarájevo, looking down at the boiling torrent. All lesser sound was overwhelmed by the uproar of the water; Lesendra had no warning of the girl's approach until two small hands gripped his arm.

"Oh no—not that!" Delight half-sobbed. "Never that. I was wrong, wrong to hurt you so. You are not what he said; you could not be. Perhaps you loved her, and—and forgot. I will tell

no one—you can try again. Danilo, dear Danilo, not that!"

Amazed, Lesendra had stood looking down at the girl who had appeared beside him like a spirit spun of the moonlight in which she was bathed. Now he laid his hand over the two clasped on his arm, bending his head to meet her gaze.

"Not what, madame?" he asked gently. "Of what cowardice do you suspect me?"

Before the clear sanity of his regard her dread dispersed like smoke. She still clung to him, but for support, not detention.

"Forgive me," she stammered.

"I thank you. But if I had been weak as you imagine, I would not have come home."

It was a confession. However calmly put, however unsustained by the steadiness of his grave eyes, it was Danilo Lesendra's admission of Michael's charge. Delight's hands slipped from his arm; she turned away and leaned against the trunk of the vine-wrapped tree.

"What will you do?" she questioned, after a while, her voice just reaching him. "When he comes back, what will you do?"

"He has come back, Countess. I am here to meet him. I do not know what Michael has said to you—"

She moved eagerly to tell him, clutching the hope extended by his ignorance. If he did not know,

surely he might yet deny. The impetuous words were at her lips, when a step echoed on the flagging, a strong, smooth voice forestalled her own.

"You are welcome, Danilo, if late. Stay there; I will come down."

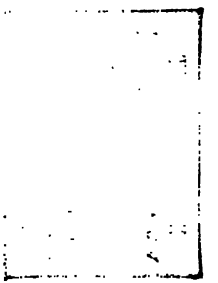
Of herself Delight thought not at all, nor of what wonder her presence here might cause. To Stefan Balsic she turned as the one stable rock in all her crumbling world, turned with passionate relief and a pity almost fierce for the man who came home to meet betrayal on his hearth. She ran a few steps toward him, then stopped in the center of the path, waiting.

"Madame!" exclaimed Count Balsic, with profound astonishment. "Madame?"

Delight flung back her head, looking up at him wordlessly. She was quite unconscious that she seemed like an apparition between the two men, in her shining, inappropriate attire made luminous by the white light. It did not occur to her that her position needed excuse. But Lesendra came forward with the protective instinct old as gentlehood, throwing down before the girl his own last privilege: that of accusing himself instead of being brought before the bar by force.

"Madame is here to meet you," he stated, his low tones clear through the water's clamor. "There has been brought to her a charge against me, which in loyalty she was carrying to you, sir."

"MADAME!" EXCLAIMED COUNT BALSIC WITH PROFOUND ASTONISHMENT, "MADAME"



"And who," returned his kinsman, composure regained as soon as lost, "who in my house has charges to bring against Danilo Lesendra? You, madame?"

"No!" Delight repulsed the burden. "No, no!"

Count Balsic looked at her with attention, then fixed his gray glance on his officer. Lesendra answered as to a spoken word.

"Let me bring it, then. I have failed in my mission, sir."

"Failed? It was not possible! You were sent to carry a report and bring back an answer."

"I have no answer, sir."

"You did not receive it in Vienna?"

"I received it, but I have given my word not to deliver it to you, sir."

"You had no word to give. You were no more than my eye and ear, my volunteered messenger."

Lesendra winced before the stern rebuke, setting his teeth in his lip. But he attempted no defense.

"I wait your pleasure, sir," he said only.

"That is no reply to make me, Danilo Lesendra. You took into your hands the task that ended the work of years, the task that concerned your honor and mine and the peace of this country. Account to me for it."

"I cannot, sir," Lesendra submitted, the words

coming with difficulty. "But send another to do what I should have done; the answer is still there, can still be brought."

"Too late! To whom have you given a duty which supersedes that you owe me?"

"To Michael Balsic, sir."

The name fell heavily, freighted with sinister implication. It left Lesendra's lips as if he loathed it. It changed the character of Stefan Balsic's anger, chilling it as fluid metal is chilled in a new mold.

"So? Twice!" he said, with stinging irony. "Is it so simple, Danilo?"

The heavy crimson flowed over Lesendra's face, visible even in that light. He took the sarcasm as he had taken the rebuke, in silence, slightly bending his head. But in spite of his passive submission, there was no yielding in his attitude. He meant to keep the word he had given to Michael.

He was not asked to break it. Count Balsic studied him through a long moment; neither the officer nor the girl misinterpreted that interval in which the master mastered himself. When he finally spoke, it was to Delight.

"What was this charge made to you, madame?"

The girl swayed, catching her breath. Her eyes were dark in the colorless face she lifted; in-

voluntarily she put out a hand toward either man as if to hold them apart.

"Oh, Captain Lesendra, I am sorry!" she cried pitifully. "You have been my kind friend since that first night when I came here. I cannot believe this—I do pray that you may prove me wrong. Count Balsic, to-day in the mountains your brother stopped me; he told me that you were tricked by your officer, that he had bought his cousin Danilo with—"

The stop was full.

"With what, madame?"

"A woman," she completed faintly, not looking at either.

"Have you no defense, Danilo?"

"No," answered Lesendra quietly. "But I have an excuse, sir."

"Will you tell it to me?"

"With your permission."

"Come to me to-morrow at the usual hour, then. You may go."

Lesendra saluted him, then Delight. To her he did not speak, but gave her one direct glance of comprehension almost femininely gentle and rich in a respect that honored her in his own fall.

With his going, a desolation beyond all pain that she had ever known swept through the girl. Even her first captivity had not been like this. Then she had had a lover, a faith; a goal to strug-

gle toward, a happiness past and to be attained. Now she faced blankness. The man she loved had never lived within Michael's form. He was a sham, and Danilo—there was no honesty.

She did not realize that she had sunk down on the great boulder and was sobbing with her face pressed against the mossy surface. Spent nerves had given way utterly, she had no more consciousness of time and place than of the diamond-fine spray studding her hair and thin dress with water-jewels.

Stefan Balsic stood regarding his wife for many moments. Once he made a swift movement toward her, and sharply checked himself in the action. Once he passed his hand across his forehead with the abrupt, incredulous gesture of one always robust and strong who suddenly finds himself in pain. Finally he turned his head away and fixed his moody gaze on the spot where Lesendra had stood.

When Delight was quieter, he came and lifted her to her feet as he might have done with Irenya, putting his arm around her unsteady figure.

"You must allow me to take you in," he said. "It is not fit for you here."

She welcomed the cold authority that saved her the necessity of thought, nor did she resent his touch.

"Take me, please," she consented, with the passivity of exhaustion.

"If you are grieving for Danilo, madame, there is no need. You may trust him to my justice, whatever you have heard of me."

"I do trust you. It is—not that."

He did not question her, yet the girl was aware of a new strangeness between them. She drew herself away, leaving only her hand on his arm, and they went slowly through the arcade down which she had sped with flying feet. Up the twisted stairs they went, and across Delight's balcony to her door, and always the strangeness grew, until it seemed to the girl that she walked beside a man she did not know.

She could find nothing to say to this stranger. When they stopped, she was wearily seeking words to bid him good-night in their usual custom. But there was no formal leave-taking. Stefan Balsic leaned toward her, then abruptly drew back, flinging wide her door so roughly that it crashed against the frame.

"Go in," he ordered harshly. "Go in, madame."

And when she had obeyed, all amazed, he threw shut the heavy door between them.

The sudden noise awakened Irenya, she hurried in, all flushed with sleep and wonder to see her mistress standing there in the moonlight.

"Countess Délice! What is it, Countess Délice?"

Delight made a step forward, and a white figure seemed to start forward to meet her. She was facing the Russian's mirror, and her own reflection.

"Countess Délice, what is it? Are you ill?"

Delight did not answer. She was gazing at herself; at a girl whose indoor dress of silk and lace left her throat bare and arms uncovered to the shoulder, a girl all white except for bronze of hair and bronze of eyes. So she had been before the two men, before Stefan Balsic—

There was a third color in the picture. Hot scarlet spread like a fire over the girl's cheeks, burning to her forehead and staining even her soft throat and bosom.

CHAPTER XV

Lesendra Rides Again

That same night Jack Rupert awoke to find Lesendra standing beside his bed, awoke with the vague knowledge that someone had been speaking to him.

"Eh?" the American raised himself on his elbow, blinking. "What?"

"Will you rise and listen to me?" Lesendra repeated. "My time is short; I may never return."

"You're leaving the castle?"

"Yes."

Rupert deliberately wrapped his small form in a lavender dressing-gown and took a chair, scrutinizing his friend. He did not like what he saw; his dark visage gathered lines of discontent.

"If you ain't averse to explaining," he began.

"I am here for that. I have failed in the errand you saw me ask of Count Balsic." Lesendra paused. "Let me put it better; I have heard it to-night plainly enough. Michael has bought me, with a woman."

"Are you expecting me to believe you?"

"It is true. Now, look; as I came here,

this note was put into my hand, brought in by a peasant boy. It may be a snare—I think it is—but I shall answer it. I am to come before Count Stefan to-morrow at nine o'clock to tell him my story. Will you hear it from me, now, so that if I do not return you can repeat it to him, with this account of why I seem to deceive him a second time?"

Rupert took the crumpled letter and held it to the lamp.

"I've seen men's nerves blow up, on the race course," he remarked judicially. "Yours are going."

Lesendra opened his lips, then closed them and flung himself into a chair. The tonic had its effect; he forced a curb upon his own quivering revolt against calmness, and watched Rupert scan the lines. They were pencilled with apparent haste, but in Michael's usual tone of mockery.

"Dear and cherished cousin:

"This to you as I cross the border of our country, so loved by both! After all, I did not need the delay I bought of you. But I do need money. In view of your probable difficulties with Stefan, I fancy you will buy my correspondence with the lady in our case. If he is incredulous, it is convincing. *Postenja mi!* Or if that word of mine is not enough,

read before you pay. You will find Josef in my house of Balsic, to play merchant, deliver and receive. He knows the price. But give him a check, *cher ami*—he has not your sensitive conscience.

"My cousin,

"Your cousin."

Rupert put his finger on the Servian phrase.

"Meaning—?"

"On his honor," Lesendra translated briefly.

"Disregarding what don't count," dismissed Rupert, returning the letter, "you plan to take the chance in a stacked game?"

"He needs money. It will do him no good to ruin me further. And I have nothing more to lose."

"You're alive," reminded the American drily.

"It will do him no good to kill me. It is Count Stefan who menaces him. Will you do the favor I ask; I have no other friend."

"If you ain't too fierce hurried to wait until I get dressed, you can tell me while we're on the road."

"You? You would go?"

"I guess you'd better not go shopping with Josef alone."

Lesendra held out his hand.

"Thank you," he said gratefully. "But who

would do what must be done here? Stay; I shall go the better knowing you are at my place in the castle."

"If you drive over with me, you'll be back in time to take your own place. I suppose you were wanting speed."

"You would take your machine, at night?"

Rupert paused in the act of reaching for a garment.

"Did you guess I was going to walk?" he snapped. "And as for riding a horse, when I turn a corner with my machine and see the way the animals on the road act, I can work out which is the safest way to travel. From what I've seen of Josef, you won't find one witness any too many to have with you."

"If it is a trap—"

"It won't shut on me. You're forgetting I'm an American citizen. I"—he paused before a mirror, adjusting his collar and scarf with nice precision. "I had a two-week visit with Michael, myself. He's got ideas about newspapers and United States' intervention that exaggerate on the safe side. He ain't likely to welcome me, if he's home—he won't hurt me. I'm coming; and if it's needed, I'll attend to this end, too. Are we going to start, or are we spending the night talking?"

The guard in the moonlit courtyard watched with amiable curiosity the process of preparing

and starting the automobile. He opened the gate for the two young men, when the motor burst into life, and smilingly uttered a farewell sentence to Lesendra.

"What did he say?" called the driver shifting into a gear as they passed out.

"He wished me a good journey and a long life," answered Lesendra. He turned in his seat, holding the castle in his gaze. "Rupert, what ails the flag, there? Look, on the staff!"

The other glanced aside for a comprehensive survey.

"I ain't a soldier. It don't show anything wrong to me. What?"

Lesendra brushed his hand across his eyes and looked again.

"Nothing. Just moon-shadows, I suppose. I thought the rope had slipped—the flag seemed halfway down the pole."

Delight, sleepless in her room, was startled by the glare of the electric search-light sweeping across her windows like summer lightning. She ran to the balcony; and saw the two steadfast beams winding along the mountain's dark side, two white swords cutting its black-plush robe. Puzzled and wondering what had sent Rupert forth, she watched until the last ray from the lamps glimmered around an angle and vanished. Irenya emerged from the tower, then, and firmly led her in.

And this time, wearied out, Delight did fall asleep.

Even to the powerful motor of Rupert's choosing, the journey to Michael Balsic's house was not short or easy of achievement. But the driver was learning the mountains; he bored steadily through the magnificent colossi, made beautiful by the night. And as he drove, now in light pure as silver, now in dense obscurity pierced thinly by their own lamps, he heard the story he was to tell Stefan Balsic. But Lesendra prefaced it by that narration to which Delight had once listened beside the cataract.

"It was Michael, always Michael," the officer said, the monotonous voice of the car braiding in and out with his. "That was what I meant when I told you the last blow would be mine. You see, I fancied it was my turn. So much for superstition! You remember how I left you? So I went to Vienna and finished my errand: on guard against everything except the thing that attacked; sure of myself. The day before I started home, I received a letter from Russia—from my mother."

There was a pause. Lesendra covered it by producing and lighting a cigarette with minute attention to detail.

"When I left my mother, I was nineteen. I have never seen her since, and I am twenty-five. The day I saw my journals in Stefan Balsic's hand, we died to each other. Never a word, never

a sign of existence has crossed the line drawn then, until the letter was put into my hand in Vienna."

"She wrote frantically, in a madness of terror. Michael had trapped her in a new intrigue, this time against the Russian government; an intrigue that would have sent her and her husband to Siberia if discovered. She had believed Michael one of themselves until too late. Now, cornered himself by Count Balsic's work in Montenegro, he set a price on her safety. He would give her the papers that convicted her, if she could obtain my promise not to carry home to the castle the information that convicted him. She begged me for life. Life? Do you know anything of Siberian prisons, Rupert? She is a beautiful woman, gently reared."

The speed of the car slackened under the driver's hand, checking almost to walking pace.

"Am I supposed to understand that we're taking this trip because you're suffering from any doubt about telling that story to Count Balsic?" Rupert demanded. "Because if that's it, I'm going to turn us around and drive back."

"On the contrary, he must hear it. He would have heard it to-night, if the Countess had not been with us. We do not conduct our affairs before our women; he dismissed me until morning."

"Still I ain't bright enough to get why we're visiting Josef. I haven't seen much of Count Balsic, but I shouldn't worry bad over what he was

liable to say, unless I'd done what you didn't. It's a case of shaking hands with you because you're guilty."

"I have no doubt of what he will say—if he believes me," said Lesendra quietly.

Rupert turned in the seat and looked at him.

"Meaning he's lived six years telling all his private business to a man he sized up as a liar?"

"I hope not. But he has not trusted me always; for the first years I was watched narrowly, held under close surveillance until I proved myself. Rupert, once he took my bare word against all evidence. I will not ask that a second time while I have any choice left. If Michael had been in Vienna or within reach, I would have killed him as willingly as I killed the Bosnian. Go on; either you or I must be back at the castle to-morrow."

The car sprang forward with the long leap of some strong, wild creature startled out of repose.

The moon sank while they drove. Smoke-hued dawn was at hand when they reached the village, a dawn that was as yet less light than a lessening of darkness. Up to the door of Michael Balsic's house the car rolled, and stopped.

Balsic did not seem to sleep, as other villages. The evil-looking population drifted, wraithlike and silent in the dusk, out of the few houses and encircled the panting, glowing automobile. Now and then a man crossed the white beam of the lamps,

briefly thrown into prominence like an actor upon whom the lime-light is fixed.

The visitors asked nothing of their audience. Rupert detained Lesendra, to lock the machine, then descended and followed him to the entrance.

The door opened with the alert wakefulness that seemed to characterize the village otherwise so negligent, and that uncannily suggested the watchfulness of an uneasy conscience. The girl in dingy finery ushered them into the first room and stared at them boldly, holding up a lamp; which last she presently set on an untidy table in the untidy room, and retired. The two men glanced around, and at each other; perhaps the same thought occurred to both, and they imagined the American Delight Warren in that setting.

They had not long to wait.

"Good-morning, Mr. Rupert and cousin," greeted a light voice. "You are early, but welcome."

Michael Balsic had entered from the other side and stood smiling at them in the doorway.

"More trickery, Michael?" Lesendra questioned, contempt curving his lip. "What now? Have I some small possession yet that I have overlooked and that you find worth coveting?"

"Why, perhaps," returned his kinsman. "But you wrong me, indeed you wrong me, cousin! I am here to sell the letters you desire, as agreed;

only, I take charge of the bargaining myself instead of leaving it to my good Josef. Mr. Rupert, all my compliments on your success of the past afternoon! But you owe something to Chance—say a candle, or a libation, as your taste trends. If those peasants had not passed, Josef might have been rash. You see, this is a frightful country for automobiles; there could have been only sympathy if you and your car had been found at the bottom of the gorge."

"I ain't denying Josef is hard on motoring," Rupert assumed his most pronounced drawl. "I found this inside the tire I changed; hit the rim, I figured out."

He had taken a flattened bullet from the pocket of his waistcoat. Michael leaned forward to identify the bit of metal lying in the other's palm, and laughed, sitting down on a corner of the table.

"Yes, I wanted to speak with Miss Warren. But the best shot in the district is Cousin Danilo. Not so, cousin?"

Lesendra drew forth a bank-book and pushed it across the table, ignoring the question.

"I am not bred to bargaining," he signified. "I have no fortune, as you know. If I have lived in Stefan Balsic's house as his officer, I have taken no money from him. What that book shows is all I own except my horse and my sword; it is what I have earned as an officer in the army. Take

it, and give me the letters which prove your transaction with my mother."

Michael picked up the bank-book and fluttered the pages.

"So little, cousin, and you Stefan's heir? Truly you are a bad manager! Better have enjoyed what you could have had from him these six years—you may not outlive him, my Danilo. Here," he carelessly pushed back the book. "I will not deprive you; take my thanks."

"Then why did you bring me here?"

"Perhaps to contemplate the devoted son who would save the lady at the expense of his friend. Frankly, cousin, I expected the ruse to fail."

"You knew it would succeed," Lesendra flashed contradiction, fire blazing through the screen of pride. "You had seen us together before you tempted her into selling me—you knew that I would give what she implored of me with every household word and memory of old affection, with every call to the boy she had loved. You knew I would free her from you, if I shot myself the next hour rather than face Count Stefan."

Michael nodded, still smiling.

"To be frank once more, cousin, I rather counted on your doing that. You honorable people are so irreligious!"

"Well, I did not," said Lesendra curtly. "And I will not. If I have been bought with a

woman, as you told the Countess, I will answer for it and not take the coward's road."

"What? Delight told you?"

"The Countess Balsic repeated to her husband, as was her duty and right, your charge against me. You knew she would do so when you told her the stripped ugliness of my action."

"You are wrong. I told the pretty American what I chose because I had good cause to believe her tender sympathies mine. It seems she is like other women; the present lover outweighs the absent—"

Lesendra's wildcat quickness struck the unfinished slur from the other's lips. He struck only once, but the force of the blow sent Michael reeling back until the wall stopped and supported him. Neither man spoke. Michael recovered himself, drew out a handkerchief and pressed the white linen against his bleeding mouth; his light-blue eyes growing opaque as smoked glass.

"Are you wise, cousin?" he presently asked, his accent a menace.

"If I had been wise I would not be here tonight," Lesendra retorted bitterly. "What do you want of me? I am not so ignorant of you as to suppose I am brought here for no purpose."

"I have told you: to bargain for certain letters."

"What is your price?"

There was a pause. Michael studied his ad-

versary, and Rupert looked at the two. Seen together, the resemblance between the cousins vanished to a mere similarity of height and coloring. Michael had the advantage of his arresting beauty, but he looked older, more hardly reckless and less debonair beside Danilo's open-browed youth. And now there was a still more marked difference made by the shadow creeping over the elder's face; a slight lifting of the upper lip, a contraction of the light eyes that touched cruelty into the expression instead of craft.

"You would not pay it, yet, cousin," said Michael softly, and again pressed the handkerchief to his cut mouth.

"You mean that I have not got it?"

"If it's money," Rupert vouchsafed a tart interpolation, "I ain't quite reduced to eating at the breadline, Lesendra, and I'd rather pay your blackmailer than anyone else except his undertaker."

Michael silenced his cousin with a gesture.

"You touch us, Mr. Rupert of New York! We are overwhelmed. But the price is not money, and Danilo has it. Come, will you buy, my Danilo? Stay, I will throw in a make-weight! Will you buy these letters, and with them some six-year-old correspondence which clears Stefan's officer of complicity in a certain scheme of espionage upon his chief? Ah, your eye kindles—your color is up! Will you buy of me, cousin?"

"Yes," said Lesendra, his breath coming unevenly.

"And—pay?"

"Yes."

"You have not heard the price."

"You told it to me in saying you had counted upon my suicide. Give the papers to Rupert, send him to the castle, and I will stay here in your hands—and Josef's."

Rupert moved sharply. But before he could protest, Michael laughed out in raillery.

"Bravo, Don Danilo Quixote! Why should I buy what I already have? No, I am less murderous than you think; my price is—information. I want to know where Stefan Balsic has set his snares, and what will happen when his second messenger comes from Vienna. A few sentences, cousin, five minutes' speech of which no one will ever hear—and you may carry your own vindication home to Stefan and live happy and honored for sixty years to come."

Lesendra regarded the other with wonder rather than wrath or disappointment.

"Have you gone mad?" he asked. "Has much plotting made you dull, Michael, that you have brought me across the mountains to answer this?"

"Not so fast, cousin. I said you would not buy —yet."

"Nor ever."

"Not after a few hours with Josef?"

Lesendra's blue-black eyes glinted naked danger. His answer was a movement which Michael countered by snatching open the door beside him. As if at a pre-arranged signal, a stream of men poured in at each of the room's three entrances and hurled themselves upon the visitors.

Rupert went down first, fighting like a cat with men who refused to injure him, overpowered by sheer weight and strength. Lesendra fired twice, then the gaudily dressed girl stole behind him and struck like a man, with a decanter seized from the table. Straight forward the officer pitched and lay at the feet of his enemies, the gold-and-pearl inlaid pistol slipped from his inert hand.

The girl screamed an excited sentence, exulting like an Amazon, then ran to Michael and kissed his hand. Himself unharmed, but with his arms bound behind him and in the restraining grip of two men, the furious Rupert leaned forward in an endeavor to see his friend through the group ringing him round.

"Stand aside and let me look," he stormed. "I ain't hesitating to tell you I'll have the United States raid this place if it has to blow down all the heap of bald mountains and slits between here and the coast. Are you going to stand aside, or am I going to suppose you've killed him? What?"

Michael turned to his second prisoner, separating his men with a gesture.

"You will notice, Mr. Rupert of New York, that you are not even scratched," he pointed out. "We have the most unfeigned respect for your very wonderful country and I could not be induced to offend it. I have merely prevented you from interfering in a family difficulty. I am our Danilo's senior in the family; it seems his conduct needs investigation, and I investigate. That is all."

"Meaning you're going to put him through a third degree of your own?"

"I remember your quaint phrase! Quite so."

The American gazed for a long moment at the motionless Lesendra, then yielded grimly.

"All right. Let me out of this place and give me my car."

"What—to bring Stefan and his men here? Impossible! No, you must remain with us until my cousin's affair is settled, Mr. Rupert. We will try to make you comfortable."

"Are you trying to say until he's dead?"

Michael shrugged his shoulders and looked at the fallen man. Busy hands had bound Lesendra and laid him face uppermost. That face was very tranquil in its pallor; the tumbled fair hair gave it an effect almost boyish. There was even the suggestion of a smile lingering about the firm lips, as if in the moment of being struck down Lesendra

had been removed an infinite distance from the hour's anxieties. Rupert's nerves jumped to the thought he looked at a dead man, but his experience told him it was not so.

A trickle of blood started from Michael's cut lips, while he stood. He lifted the handkerchief to it, then as if recalled by the smart, he stooped down and struck his helpless enemy on the mouth.

Rupert snarled out an oath, casting himself forward against his bonds. Only his captor's grip on his shoulders kept him from over-balancing. Michael regarded him and laughed, and the Austrian Josef, standing near, laughed also.

"Be patient, Mr. Rupert," the first urged. "Cousin Danilo has the fault of obstinacy. I think we can cure him of it. If I had not been sure of it I should not have invited him here. If you are ill at ease, remember I did not invite you."

"You'll get nothing out of him, unless you hypnotize him," snapped the American with vicious satisfaction. "I ain't denying I hope to see you hung."

"I shall have had my little pleasures, even in that event." He paused, contemplating the red-stained linen in his hand. "When you meet Stefan Balsic, Mr. Rupert, tell him our Cousin Danilo loved him, and was loyal to him—and tell him all you see here."

CHAPTER XVI

The Dream of a Tsar

Delight awoke very late next morning from the heavy sleep into which she had fallen shortly before dawn. There seemed nothing for which to awake, at any hour, she reflected drearily. She knew now, felt to the heart of her, that Stefan Balsic had been right and she could never marry Michael. Her uncle and aunt had been right also. They had seen from the first the man she had seen yesterday; and he was not good. Even the love he showed for her was not a good love; not a love that gave and sheltered, but a love that demanded and despoiled. Yet, with his going the core was torn out of her scheme of life. There was no object in it; she was no longer a traveler toward a goal, but a wanderer straying aimlessly over a roadless plain.

Irenya came in, at last, carrying the chocolate they always drank together. Her blue eyes were alight with the importance of one bringing news.

"Countess Délice, imagine that Mr. Rupert went away in the automobile, last night while all slept!"

"I know; I saw the car leave. He will come back, Irenya Ivanovna."

"Yes, Countess Délice. Danilo went with him."

Effectually aroused, Delight sat up.

"Captain Lesendra? He has gone away?"

"They went together, as I have said. They have not returned."

Delight meditated the situation.

"Did Count Balsic know?"

"But certainly not, since this morning at nine he asked for Danilo, as every day when both are in the castle. He—" daintily crunching a lump of sugar from the tray—"he knows, now."

"Is he—displeased?"

Irenya paused, chocolate-pot in hand.

"Oh, but if Lord Stefan had not approved, Danilo would not have gone, Countess Délice!"

The departure did not signify a dismissal, since it had taken place before Count Balsic had heard Lesendra's story and without his knowledge. Did it mean flight? If Lesendra had felt himself in danger, it would have been like the good-hearted Rupert to aid his escape. Or—would it? Doubt assailed the girl. The little sportsman could be grim enough when his contempt was provoked; would it not have been more in character for him to bid the faithless messenger face what he had earned? Where could they have gone, on what errand?

"Take away the chocolate, Irenya; I do not want it."

"Will you rise, Countess Délice?"

"Yes."

What had Michael done to Danilo Lesendra during that journey to Vienna? All the morning that question took clearer form in Delight's mind. Last night she had been so horribly confused that she had conceived the young officer Michael's ally and willing tool, perhaps practised in deceit ever since that first time when he had won from Count Balsic a pardon not deserved. But to-day she saw more justly. Lesendra was not deliberately wicked, she decided; he was weak, and some woman had entangled him in a love affair. Michael, Lesendra—were all the men she could take into her affections either bad or weak? Was there some flaw in her, that she could choose nothing that was sound?

The day was very long. Delight spent it on her balcony, watching for the return of the automobile. She passionately desired Lesendra to return and at least clear himself of the imputation of cowardly flight. But the afternoon shadows crept down the mountains, and brought no voyagers to the castle's gates. And there slowly grew upon the girl a conviction that Stefan Balsic's officer would not return; that Lesendra had taken

leave of his chief last night in the moonlit arcade.

Listlessly, even with reluctance, she let Irenya dress her for dinner. Ever since she had faced herself in the Russian's mirror, and fancied she interpreted Count Balsic's harsh leave-taking as displeasure at her descent into his garden in such a dress, at such an hour, Delight had gone hot with embarrassment when she thought of meeting him. He could not know the keenness of fear for Lesendra that had sent her to the cataract. She could imagine no way to tell him of it without an appearance of still more humiliating apology.

The American possessed one black lace gown she had never worn, too proud to endure its suggestion of mourning in her captivity. She was not too proud to lay aside gaiety in this first night of Danilo's absence, remembering she had borne witness against him. There was the Bosnian, too. Delight felt herself akin to Judith and Jael, and all the stern, fierce women of old time who had taken blood on their hands for a cause.

She had no cause. Why had she done this for Stefan Balsic? Why was she certain that she would do all again, even in her aching pity for Danilo Lesendra?

Count Balsic made a slight movement at sight of the girl's somber figure, when they met, but he greeted her with the steady naturalness of every

day. And Delight's threatened embarrassment was forgotten in their first exchange of glances.

When they were in the dining-room, before the girl took her seat, he touched the black drapery of her sleeve as she took her hand from his arm.

"Is that for Danilo, madame?" he asked. "Have my theories of heredity alarmed you so far?"

She looked up wonderingly, and saw his gray eyes were smiling, in spite of the unmistakable fatigue that seemed to point to a night and day no less jading than her own.

"Yes," she admitted candidly. "And I told you—perhaps if I had not he would never have failed again. Now, he is gone."

"He will come back."

"He will? You know that?"

This time it was the man who showed surprise.

"Why should he not? Where he is to-night is of his choosing, not mine. I did not send him out, nor is my door closed."

"He might be afraid," she said, her voice falling low at the last word.

"Of what?"

"Of—you."

"Because I lost my temper last night? I have never claimed to be amiable. Believe me, madame, Danilo knows well that he has no right to resent a rough answer to such a report as he made me."

"But that is it!" Delight exclaimed, all the pain of the long day and her bewilderment at this attitude voiced in the cry. "He has no right—he does know he has no right to be in your house, since he was not true to you. He has no right to resent whatever you may do. Oh, I am sorry for him, sorry, but he has done what must make you distrust him for life! How can you speak of your lost temper, as if he told you some trifling thing?"

He came closer to her as she stood grasping the back of her chair, studying her uplifted face.

"What, then, do you imagine Danilo has done?" he questioned, gently as Lesendra himself could have spoken.

"He said it." Scarlet sprang through her pallor as if the disgrace were her own. "He was untrue to you—for a price."

"No."

"No?" stupefied.

"If I tell you the truth, it will hurt you, madame."

"Not if it tells me that!"

"Then, some trap has been set for Danilo and he has let it close upon him. There is no question of his faith; he has simply been out-matched in craft by Michael Balsic."

"But, last night? You said to him—"

"Only that. What else? Do you suppose me

so poor a judge of men as not to know Danilo Lesendra after having him beside me for six years?"

"When he comes home," she began.

"I shall probably send him back to Vienna to re-do his errand. Shall we not dine this evening, madame?"

Sighing, the girl let her arms fall; she felt the tension of hours relax. She did not doubt Count Balsic's judgment; on the contrary, she marvelled how she had ever doubted Lesendra. She lingered to put one more question.

"Did he know? Captain Lesendra—did he understand how you felt toward him?"

Again surprise drifted across his expression.

"Of course," answered Stefan Balsic, in the tranquillity of his great mistake.

Delight sank into her chair. It seemed that calmness settled through her; an exquisite stillness after long tumult. She had not hurt Danilo; presently he and Rupert would come driving home, and the old peace would dwell in the castle. In what absurd nightmare had she been wandering?

Of Michael she refused to think. She would take the respite offered by this hour.

Perhaps Count Balsic divined his companion's mood. He took up the light conversation civilization has set aside as appropriate to the dinner-

table, and led her with him. Delight followed him willingly, even gratefully. It was very pleasant to linger through the meal, very pleasant to find this relief from the day's solitude.

There were some pomegranate blossoms on the table, brought from the warm plain below. During one of the pauses, Delight took a spray of the crimson flowers from their vase and put them into the bosom of her black gown. The impulse was not careless; it was an intentional apology to the man whose justice she had wronged in fearing for Lesendra. There was almost passion in her gratitude to the one stable personality in her world; the man who might be hard, but who stood like his own unchanging mountains, not failing others nor swayed by them. Yes, he was a man of the Karst; promising nothing yet giving much, like that stern desert which offered death, yet had sheltered a nation alive for five centuries. Even his stately figure filled the eye like those imposing hills he defended.

Stefan Balsic had been watching the girl's white fingers busied with the blossoms. Now he lifted his glance higher, and met her clear eyes fixed on him in that regard of whose significance she herself was ignorant. Arrested, his gaze held hers; into his gray eyes sprang a strangeness, a kindling like the up-leap of white fires. He did not move, yet it seemed to the girl that he leaned to-

ward her, then suddenly drew back. If he had raised his arm to hold her away she could have felt no stronger sense of a defense lifted against her. But she was not repelled; on the contrary, they advanced in knowledge of each other, meeting face to face in a strange place where both stood uncertain.

Delight first broke the regard, looking away to the vase of pomegranates and taking a second cluster of the flowers as the nearest pretext. Her impulse was toward a retreat to the tower, her reason held her still. She could have seized the white sleeve of the Albanian pouring her coffee and begged him to stay.

"Those should be for your hair," said Count Balsic.

As always, his quiet voice put aside constraint. She smiled, turning the flowers in her fingers, then lifted them and fastened the crimson spray in the smooth tresses Irenya had coiled.

"They are better set in bronze than in silver," he approved the action. "You should wear rubies, or carbuncles like those Irenya will bring you and which have kept their red in the Russian house almost as long as this cup has kept its identity in Crnagora."

Delight glanced at the silver goblet, and shivered.

"I wonder you can drink from it," she ex-

claimed, the thought one that had recurred to her nightly since the time she had struck down the poisoned coffee.

The dinner was ended; she stirred to depart with the last word.

"Stay a little longer, and I will tell you the story of the silver cup," Count Balsic offered. "I have heard you are fond of legends."

Surprised, Delight paused.

"You do not want to stay, madame?"

"I—yes."

In the arched room beyond, with its soft lights and softer shadows, the two found places opposite each other. Up in her tower Irenya was singing, the "song with a heart which beats." Her chin in her cupped palm, leaning on the arm of the Greek chair she had chosen, the American listened to alien music and alien story, her eyes on the alien mountains across which moonlight was creeping.

"Centuries ago, madame, when this land was called Zeta and gave birth to the great Servian tsar Stefan Dushan, the family of Balsic ruled it. Their government stretched from Ragusa far into Herzegovina, so that modern Montenegro is but a small portion of the old; and it is recorded that the province flourished under their mastery. Do you know the great dream that made Stefan Dushan great, and that he brought near ac-

complishment before it burst and left a ruin greater than all? He dreamed of a huge Servian empire, formed of our united Balkan countries and snatching Constantinople from the Moslems for our capital. There was one of the Balsics who had dreamed with Dushan, lived and loved and fought with him in that magnificent failure, and died on the scarlet field of Kossovo. The Tsar loved this comrade no less than he was loved, the legend tells; and in his days of power once presented him with the silver cup from which the two visionaries had pledged faith to the vision.

"'When I rule in Stamboul, give me back this cup and demand of me what you will,' said Stefan Dushan.

"Of prince and noble, the noble died first. The claim was never made, but the cup was guarded. In the Venetian wars the Balsic family shrank to one branch; in the long warfare with the Turks wealth vanished and possessions were lost, but Stefan Dushan's cup was kept. From eldest son to eldest son it has descended, to end here."

"I threw it to the ground," Delight reproached herself, the eyes of her fancy gazing down that long vista as if to meet the rebuking eyes of the long-dead prince.

"If it could break, it would have broken when it was filled that night," he answered. "It is but metal, after all, madame."

She understood the allusion and the bitterness more fully than he realized. Yes, a more fragile cup might well have shattered, when a Balsic poured death into it and held it to the lips of his brother. Because she had no defence for Michael, Delight bent her head, and was silent until she could speak on a new theme.

"Each day I learn better why you love this country," she said presently. "America is so far away, girl-children taught so many useless things and so little aside from the beaten route, that I never did hear the dream of the Tsar Stefan Dushan. That would have been a wonderful power in Europe, all these centuries—the power of a united Servian empire instead of the Turkish influence. I am sorry the dream died."

"It is not dead," asserted Stefan Balsic quietly.

"Not—dead?"

"No. Take Servian in its full meaning: Serb, and in each country of that race you will find some man or men in whom the dream lives; perhaps some who work for it, certainly many who would die for it."

Her pulses leaped with a thrill of conviction.

"You are one of them!" she divined, her voice catching the tremor of her blood. "You are one who works—and Captain Lesendra works with you. That is what you guard from betrayal

—not only you fear the spread of socialism, but the death of that dream. That is what you feared my money would do."

Again she saw flash in his gray eyes the look that was like the naked glint of unsheathed steel. His hand fell and closed on the arm of his chair; the hand of a man whose ancestors had served their kings in the field and who served his in the cabinet: strong, not small, and white as the girl's.

"Yes," he confirmed the hazard. And after a moment: "You are acute."

The full trust moved her almost to tears of pride and keen excitement, and such sympathy as makes men pledge themselves to a cause. She glimpsed at last her companion's lofty ambition, that dared grip in his people's mailed hand the map of Eastern Europe and crumple another empire into ruin to make their own. She saw in him the dreamer who could conceive, the diplomatist who could guide, the general who would battle when the red hour was ripe.

"It would be war!" she breathed, her gaze on his, her color high. "War, between—"

"Serb and Turk."

"But, your Serb countries are so small, compared with your enemy! Turkey is powerful, enormous, rich!"

"Do you recall Japan and Russia, madame?

There is no strength in immensity if its core is rotted."

"You would win? Oh, I do believe it! And then, the new empire! Who—" she halted before a new thought, a still more daring vision evolved. "Who then would rule the united people?"

"If it comes for this generation, there is one man fitted above all rivals," he slowly answered. "Fitted by birth, by splendid spirit, by ability and the virtue God has given him to win men's trust."

"You mean—?"

"Nikolas of Montenegro."

She had fancied he planned for himself. Once again she stood rebuked by finding the man towering above where she would have placed him. Delight was herself fine enough to recognize loyalty as more fine than self-service. What she had named ambition was the broader hope called patriotism.

"You do not agree with my choice?" he interpreted her silence.

"I do, I do!" she contradicted warmly. "I know you are right, right in all. And you are right to let nothing stand in the path of your people—right to reproach Captain Lesendra's failure, right to make a prisoner the ignorant girl who threatened all. I never will be such a

danger, now that I understand. Whatever happens, I do promise that."

In her vehement earnestness she had risen and leaned toward him. The vivid flowers in her breast and hair were like another expression of the excitement tinting her lips and cheeks; without any consciousness of herself, she was beautiful as pure flame is beautiful.

Stefan Balsic had risen with her as a mechanical act of courtesy. But he made no answer at all. Delight did not notice the omission, far less fathom its meaning or realize that she had admitted Michael's guilt. Before he could find words, she swept him on to a new phase of the subject.

"But Captain Lesendra did not fail you wilfully. I see that! You are wise as well as just. Only, there is one thing you do not realize—I am quite sure you do not realize it. And it made last night dreadful to him. He loves you, but he told me you did not love him and never had forgotten that he first entered your house as a spy."

"That is mere morbidness, and untrue."

"Ah, but he believes it! And last night you reproached him with failing you *twice*."

"No! I asked him if he had twice allowed Michael to out-play him in craft. I have admitted that I lost my temper."

"Did you look at his face? This great work he serves, as well as you—it is his very heart. If he thought he had forfeited your trust, he might do anything. Where has he gone?"

"I do not know," he avowed, his brow grave. "He has done a foolish thing in leaving me. It is more than that; he is a soldier, and he was under orders to report to me this morning."

The girl searched his expression, striving to read there.

"You think—you have some idea of where he has gone?" she questioned. "You are not pleased?"

"I think he has gone back to Vienna, to accomplish the mission in which he before failed. I am not pleased, no, at having my right of direction taken from me even by his eagerness to make amends."

Delight slowly shook her head. The explanation did not satisfy her.

"He went with Mr. Rupert," she recalled. "It was something they could do together. They would not try to drive to Austria. And surely Captain Lesendra would not have gone on a long journey without an explanation to you. It is not like him."

"To-morrow, if he has not returned, I will have him traced."

"You can do that?"

"I could do it if he rode alone, unless he turned across the wilderness. With the automobile the task is simple."

"You could have had that done before!" escaped her.

"I have been watching for him all day," said Stefan Balsic.

The admission brought her close to him in sympathy; she also had kept the watch of anxiety and affection. Impulsively she put out her hand, then let it fall by her side and turned away, again awakened to all the personal element.

"I will go," she uttered hurriedly. "You have been very good. It is growing late."

It was not far to the door of the tower, but they walked together. Neither spoke on the way. Count Balsic asked no pledge of confidence to be kept, from the woman to whom he had told so much. Delight did not misunderstand; she knew he trusted her intellect to recognize the need for secrecy, and her honor to guard it. In both, she was very proud.

But at each step her anxiety for Lesendra grew out of all proportion to the apparent cause. His departure with Jack Rupert, the reason for it suggested by the Vienna errand, her knowledge of his boy's impetuosity that might send him out on a blind effort to repair his fault—all yielded

her no reassurance. At the door she lifted her eyes to Stefan Balsic's face, lingering on the threshold. Irenya was still singing; Delight remembered that sun-drenched morning when she had stood with Danilo Lesendra in the arcade and listened to the girl's voice weaving such music as now.

"I am afraid," she whispered, like a child. "I am afraid for Captain Lesendra."

"I have trusted Danilo in much," he answered musingly. "It seems that he could not trust me."

CHAPTER XVII

The Dark Night

A bolt was drawn back with the long, rasping grate soon grown familiar to one prisoner at least. The grind of rusty hinges followed, and an arrow of yellow light darted across the room. Jack Rupert sat up, expectant, on the side of his bed.

It was not his room that had been entered, however, but the one adjoining. From it he was separated by a grille, or screen of heavy metal-work; curious enough in such a place and probably the spoil from some over-thrown fortress of other days. The barrier was as impassable as a stone wall, without hindering vision. Through it the American watched a man cross the other room to an improvised couch on which lay the other captive. Over Lesendra the visitor bent, evidently ascertaining his condition. Satisfied of it, he withdrew as mutely as he had entered, leaving the lamp on a table.

"Doctor?" inquired Rupert briefly.

Lesendra fixed his steady eyes on the grating. Rupert was free, but Danilo was still bound, as he had been after his fall under the girl's weapon twenty hours before.

"No; Josef," he corrected.

"I guessed I knew his shape. He's been in your cell about every two hours while you were knocked out. When he saw you were coming to life, last visit, he poured a cupful of something down your throat and left you to pull yourself together. I suppose he sees you've done it."

Lesendra moved wearily, as much as was possible to him. The lamp-light showed the anxious Rupert his pallor, and in sharp contrast the red stain on the pillow where his fair head had rested.

"Yes, he saw. I am well enough. Rupert, they will set you free, after this. You will repeat my message to Count Stefan? You will not forget?"

"I ain't cursed with that kind of memory. It's my idea that you'll give it to him yourself."

"Thank you. I hope so, too. But now there is only one thing you can do for me: whatever you may see here, make no threats, no protests which will make Michael afraid to set you free. If you will not be silent for your own protection, be so for mine. You cannot help me—shut your eyes and ears."

"Do you mind explaining to an ignorant New Yorker what you're expecting to happen?" was the dry query.

"I do not know. You heard Michael say I was not ready to talk—yet."

"Are we discussing Apache Indians?"

"We are dealing with an unscrupulous Russian, to-night. Do you know the type?"

"I've read some stories I ain't anxious to believe. Are you meaning—"

"I do not know—I do not care!" Lesendra repeated impatiently. "It does not matter. I only ask you not to take any action that would force Michael to keep you here."

"And admitting he has a disposition like that, you came visiting Michael with your head full of news he wants to hear?" snapped Rupert. "Were you crazy, or just out of your mind?"

Lesendra looked at him, and turned away his head.

"I am like you; I was too civilized to conceive that danger," he answered quietly. "I was thinking of another subject, or I would not have brought you."

"I ain't denying you were. When you say 'it don't matter,' Lesendra, you're forgetting your sister, too. Can you get your ideas fixed on the fact you'll be leaving alone a girl that's pretty enough to start anything and so good she's helpless. We've got to get you out of here."

"My—sister?"

"Have you any more than Miss Irenya? I didn't know it."

Lesendra was silent for a long moment.

"I remember, seeing you with Irenya," he recalled slowly. "Did you—have you become friends, then, while I was away?"

"More than that!" brusquely amplified Rupert. "Are you supposing I was planning to start away from your house this week because I was tired of being there? I've said my wedding cards would never happen; and they won't. I'm built so I can't fall in love with any woman but the kind I wouldn't ask to sit in the grand-stand and wait. Yes, I've seen women after their men were carried in after a smash—and no girl will have that wished on her by me. Well—I'm getting out in time."

"Because you love Irenya?"

Rupert's dark face took on a meditative discontent.

"You're running too fast! I haven't said so. But when I can't see a lady without thinking of a machine for two and driving the little queen up Broadway and through the park home, it's time to go."

The tread of approaching feet sent a muffled echo through the door. Lesendra moved his head and looked toward his friend, his dark-blue eyes smiling and warm with their familiar gaiety.

"Stay!" he advised. "Irenya will glory in your daring and bear your disasters with stoical pride. You have come to the right country for

your wife, Rupert—were you tamely safe, she would not love you. Stay; and tell Count Stefan that Danilo Lesendra gave Irenya to you."

The bolt uttered its harsh warning.

"Help me now," Lesendra urged for the last time, as the door opened.

Michael Balsic was the visitor, accompanied by Josef and two others, not Montenegrins. The significance of that choice among his followers was not pleasant, nor unconfirmed by his expression.

"You are recovered, cousin, I hear," he opened, with his cool self-possession. "It has taken more hours than I can well afford. Josef, place a chair for me and stand farther back with your men. Mr. Rupert of New York is well, also, I hope?"

Neither prisoner answered. Lesendra watched with a still contempt that matched his enemy's composure, while Michael seated himself.

"So silent, cousin? We have yet to conclude the bargain for which you came here. Come, speak. Stefan would sacrifice you soon enough, should you stand in the way of his plans. Ah, that touches you?"

"It is a lie," declared Lesendra coldly. "You always lied, Michael. I have no bargain to make with you."

"Careful, cousin, careful! You will not bar-

gain with me? Then I will tell you what I want and what you will give me."

"I will give you nothing."

"We shall see. First, I will be frank. Stefan has won our duel; a little more time, and I will be compelled to leave Montenegro. I am to be made an exile, perhaps; I am not to be made a poor exile. Have you considered, my Danilo, what certain countries would pay in gold for some of the knowledge you hold?"

Lesendra made a movement that would have been a shrug under other conditions.

"Knowledge of you, Michael? No country is interested except Crnagora—and it would give steel, not gold."

The other's affectation of lightness dropped from him like a masquer's cloak; he leaned forward.

"Knowledge of Stefan!" he exclaimed vehemently. "Knowledge of what he is planning; of what is discussed in those Paris meetings so closely guarded; of what draws certain men to meet him there! What is it? What is afoot? I can guess; you know. You know, Danilo Lesendra, for where Stefan has been, you have been at his side. Now do you believe I am in earnest? Now do you understand what I will have from you? Give it, and I will give you the letters you want and set you free. No one shall know I have my information from you, and the American will hold

his tongue for your sake. Refuse, and I will drag speech from you."

"You cannot," Lesendra answered. He held his steadiness of glance and voice, but even the uninformed Rupert knew that Michael's penetration and demand had profoundly startled him.

"No? I will use force."

"You cannot make me speak. I am no match for you in cunning; I am in this. Borrow the Turks' methods, if you can stoop so low; I tell you it will be of no use."

"Are you so courageous? Will your pride bear the lash, cousin?"

Scarlet burned through the officer's pallor with the quick up-leap of flame.

"We are gentlemen, Michael," he signified. "There are threats not used between us. I say again that you will learn nothing from me; finish with me, in decency."

"The threat is made, Danilo. Speak, or we must try persuasion."

"I will not speak."

"Not to escape ignominy—and you a Montenegrin?"

"No."

Michael nodded acceptance of the decision; a touch of compunction transiently visited his face.

"I thought we should come to it," he said. "Yet—spare yourself, cousin! It will be the same

in the end. You can understand when I remind you that stronger men than Danilo Lesendra have babbled their secrets, and their comrades', in the prisons of our mothers' country."

"I will not so."

There was no arrogance in the assertion, only a final certainty. The cousins looked at each other, then Michael spoke to one of his men, who left the room. The dumb, raging American could not understand, but he saw the color recede even from Lesendra's lips.

"If I live, I will kill you, Michael," his kinsman promised, and closed silence between them as a door not to be opened.

. . . . . .

Near dawn, at the close of that night, Delight started up in the canopied bed of the Princess Marya Feodorovna, crying out so sharply that Irenya cried out in answer and sprang from her own bed in the next room, running to her mistress.

"What is it? Countess Délice, what is it? What is wrong? Are you then ill?"

Trembling and shaken, Delight clung to the girl, gazing with wide dark eyes into the shadows of the room beyond.

"Someone is out there," she panted. "I was awake—I have been dreaming, horribly,—I heard someone move."

"That was still the dreams, Countess Délice,"

argued Irenya, with the security of a lifetime. "Who should be there?"

"I do not know. I heard steps, and a chair was pushed."

"Why should anyone come—unless Lord Stefan—"

"No, no! Give me something to wear; take one of my gowns, yourself, and we will see."

Irenya obeyed with the patience of one indulging a child. But a new fancy came to Delight during the moment of making ready, a fancy that drove out fear. Could Lesendra have come to her, as he had once before, in a determination that took no heed of place or hour? Perhaps he wanted her help.

"Light the lamps," she bade. "No; bring the tall one. Out here."

But the blue room was empty when the two girls crossed the threshold. Irenya set the lamp on a table and lighted another.

"See?" she smiled triumphant incredulity. "There is nothing."

Delight seized her companion's arm, as she would have gone forward.

"Wait—they are on the balcony!"

In fact, the long window opening on the balcony was swinging back.

"Delight!" greeted the visitor, and entered with the assured bearing of one consciously wel-

come. "It is only I, *belle amie.* Why, you are not afraid of me?"

This time it was Irenya who cried out in wonder and indignation. Delight uttered no sound, but there was a meaning in her attitude which halted Michael Balsic's advance.

"Delight?" he repeated, with some impatience. "What, are you still angry because I would have taken you with me, the last day? Or was it my rough tongue? Well, I have come to bring apologies. Are you so unforgiving, you, who look so gentle?"

As he came nearer, Delight aroused herself and pushed off Irenya's clasping arms.

"Go over there, by the door; go away from me, Irenya," she commanded imperatively. "Stand away—farther off. Michael, how have you come here? Why?"

The bewildered girl obeyed her, drawing away and looking from one to the other.

"A warm greeting to your chosen husband!" Michael commented bitterly. "Why? Because I am not cured of love, if you are. You fair, soft ladies are quick to leave a man in trouble—there is a kitchen-girl in my house who nearly killed a man she thought dangerous to me, a night ago; I never gave her a kind glance, I gave you all. But Stefan has told you I am ruined!"

The tears darkened across Delight's eyes. The

night had left its mark on him; there was a worn desperation in his face that moved her more than the beauty she had loved.

"Not for that!" she refuted the reproach. "Michael, did I ever care that you were poor, or did I fail you when you were attacked? Even here, I defended you against all proof; I would believe no evil of you—until you yourself made it plain."

"Made what plain? That I would have used any means to set you free? Say I am no convent girl and was mad. I am sane, now, and I have come to you. Let us begin again. Have you forgotten all the happiness we planned together? Shall we not try again for it, Delight?"

She put out her hand to motion him back, regarding him fixedly.

"Not only what you did for me! There is more—Michael, where is Danilo Lesendra?"

The demand was unexpected. With all his self-possession, it checked the man who had come from that unequal duel with his cousin.

"You ask me?" he temporized. "Is he my officer?"

"No, no! But he was with you in Vienna—I believe you know where he has gone now. What did you do to force this trouble upon him? Not what you told me on the road; he was not bought, he could not be! You made me think so, then.

Oh, Michael, it was cruel to send me home with that charge against him! And he met me so gently— If you know where he has gone, tell me, so we may find him."

"Your gentle Danilo is the hardest of us all," Michael retorted, with a sombre force beyond her comprehension. "He is nothing to me, now, or to you. I have not come here to talk of him; although he sent me."

"He sent you here?"

"Yes, by ending every hope I had; except in you. Will you fail me, too, *belle amie?*"

"What can I do?" she asked, struggling between pity and fear of him. "What do you want of me?"

"What? I want yourself; the woman who came here to be my wife. I am leaving this country to-morrow. I do not ask you to go with me, since you stand so fixed on the narrow line called virtue; but will you follow and join me in your own land? I can arrange for you to travel back with Rupert, as you came. In New York we will meet and have this marriage undone to make way for our own. We will never come here, never see these people we both hate—what are their petty outcries to us? Have I considered you this time, Delight? Are you content to come?"

"No," she said faintly.

"You refuse?"

"We are too different; there is too much between us. I am sorry—I have suffered, too. You changed, Michael, or I would never have changed. Forgive me, and find another wife who does not know your people."

He moved swiftly and caught her wrists in his angry grasp.

"Say rather that you have a new lover! I have been dull. Yes, I have known many of you good women—if you had not found someone to take my place, you have made a virtue of following me. Who is it—Stefan or Danilo?"

"Let me go," Delight panted, in anger equal to his. "Do not touch me. If Irenya opens that door and calls, his men will kill you as they did the Bosnian."

"'His men'! It is Stefan, then?"

"Stay there, Irenya! Michael, let me go, or I will cry for help."

"You will, and have me found here at this hour?"

She had not thought of that. How could Michael be found here, and she be believed innocent of inviting him? How could she prove that he had not been here before? At best, there would be doubt. Stefan Balsic would never trust her again.

What had he said to her that night, at the door of the tower? Through her confused panic the

recollection pierced. "It seems that Danilo could not trust me," she heard the quiet reproach. Could not trust him to judge fairly— Was she to make Lesendra's mistake? Delight raised her head.

"Yes," she said.

Michael read his defeat in the clear, steady eyes. Mockery flashed up in his expression; across mortification he drew the cloak of light indifference.

"All my compliments, Madame de Balsic! You are well entered into our courageous house. You, and Danilo—I am learning something of you dove-eyed people! But all this is wasted, *belle amie;* I take no grudged kisses. I have never lacked others. Being born a gentleman, I rode here to keep our engagement. You have ended it; good, I go. Madame—"

He saluted her with ironical deference, and drew back. Dazed by the suddenness of her release, Delight let him reach the window before she started forward with the question he alone could answer.

"Michael, what do you mean—you speak of Captain Lesendra? Is he in Vienna? Will you not tell me that much?"

He paused beside the window, looking at her, then threw back his head and laughed.

"I wish you had loved Danilo, my Delight!

Yes, he is in Vienna. Tell Stefan so; and, good-night."

Irenya sped to each window, closing it and pushing its bar across. She looked like an outraged young vestal as she worked, her blue eyes fired, her strong white arms swinging the heavy fastenings. That done, she ran to the carved chest and began to search in it, ruthlessly scattering its contents.

"Once there was a pistol," she soliloquized. "I have seen it. It was a good pistol."

"Hush!" Delight begged. "Listen. If we hear nothing, we will know he has gone safely. Listen with me."

Irenya stopped her quest to stare at the pale American.

"You are troubled for that bad man, Countess Délice? You fear so much he will meet harm?"

"No!" Delight broke under the tension. "No! I am afraid he will be seen leaving me!"

Irenya sprang to her mistress, drawing her into a chair and soothing her with caressing touches and remonstrance.

"That is a folly! Yes, it is one of those follies of which great ladies have many, Countess Délice. Am I not here? Have I not seen? To-morrow you will tell Lord Stefan of this which has happened, and he will set a guard at the foot of the little stairs."

Delight lifted her face from her hands, startled anew.

"Tell—Lord Stefan?"

"Certainly, you would do nothing else, Countess Délice."

Certainly there was nothing else so wise, Stefan Balsic's wife slowly realized. There could be no better warrant of her innocence; no better protection if Michael had been seen. And now more than ever she passionately desired to keep the respect she honestly deserved.

"Irenya, are you a child or a woman?"

Irenya smoothed the yellow braids over her full bosom with calm complacence.

"It is plain that I am of a considerable age, since I am seventeen the week which is coming, and therefore soon to be married. Now you will sleep again, since the windows are barred? It is safe, you observe. If Danilo had not been away, no one could have passed his arcade without awakening him. But now we will have a guard. Yes, we will have a guard, until Danilo comes home."

The moon was low; almost they were at the black hour between its setting and the first dawn. There had been no break in the stillness, and there had passed more than time for Michael's retreat. Delight drew a deep breath, looking down at her wrists. The soft flesh was bruised and dis-

colored; she could see the darkening marks as she held her hands to the lamp-light. He had not cared, he had not even noticed; and once they had loved each other.

She knew he hated her, now; she had seen the desire to wound savage behind his affected indifference. Why, in that mood, had he regretted that she did not love Lesendra?

"Countess Délice, you are then cold, that you shiver?"

"No. Yes! Bring me a cloak, dear; I will wait for the dawn here."

"Are you afraid? Is it that you desire the guard now?"

Delight shook her head. Yes, she was afraid, but not for herself. She could not tell Irenya that her fear was of how long the guard might stand who waited until Danilo came home.

CHAPTER XVIII

Count Balsic's Wife

"Madame—?"

Irenya drew the curtain aside, demure as always in the presence of her guardian. He smiled as he passed, regarding her, for she was again arrayed in the pink frock and he saw her so for the first time. Broken rest had no dimming power over her young vigor; she glowed in the fresh morning with the bright colors of a flower. But she gave the visitor no time for comment, had he wished to speak; dropping the curtain behind him, she went back to her embroidery with the placidity of one who had no part in the proceedings.

The girl for whom the visit was intended glowed with a color and life no less vivid, but drawn from keen sensitiveness instead of repose; indeed from a distress almost become fever. Delight had faced herself, during the long hours between dawn and this time. Michael had dragged her from unconsciousness with his cynical acuteness; his demand —"Stefan, or Danilo?" Shame had scorched her, self-contempt raged in her, she hated herself as light-of-love; for he had spoken a truth. She had put another in his place. She, who had prided her-

self on her constancy, who meant to love once only and for all time, had turned from one man to another like a fickle creature of the boulevards. She had turned to Stefan Balsic, who had never wooed her, who did not desire her; to whom she had protested devotion to Michael not three days past. He, who did not change—how would he look at her if he knew? How was she to meet him, now that she herself knew?

"You sent for me, madame?"

She had stood facing the window, blindly feigning absorption to postpone the moment of meeting. At the question, she gripped her quivering nerves and turned.

"I beg your pardon. Yes. I have heard of Captain Lesendra."

The level tones of her own voice reassured her. When he did not speak she continued with more certainty:

"He is in Vienna, as you said. I thought you should know. I would have sent for you only because of that."

"Why?" he asked, with the quietness she was learning to understand so well. "Why should you not send for me at any time? Have you not that right?"

"I have no right here. Soon I shall go home, very soon. If you would take my word, I could go now."

In spite of herself, the last words were almost a cry. Count Balsic drew a step nearer, looking down at the girl who would not look at him.

"Do you want to leave my house, madame?"

"Yes!" she told him her first falsehood, clenching her small hands in the folds of her dress. "Yes, yes!"

"Very well."

The blue tints of the room swam in a kaleidoscopic dazzle and blur before her eyes; she felt her heart stop, and leap.

"You—consent?"

"You are free."

She was not, nor would ever be.

"Thank you," she said, with stiff lips, as if acknowledging some casual courtesy. "I—perhaps you will go now; I shall have much to do, to make ready."

"I have offended you?"

"Certainly not. I am very grateful."

"You had something to tell me of Danilo, I think?"

"I have said it. He is in Vienna."

He did not move to go; instead, she felt his presence like the nearness of flame to the coldness settling through her, exquisite, yet close to pain.

"What has hurt your wrists, madame?"

The question was too much. Delight made a movement to conceal the dark bruises, then impul-

sively shook back her lace sleeve and held out both arms to his scrutiny. At last her lovely, ashamed eyes met his.

"He came here!" she flung her huddled anger and grief before him in account. "He came here last night, into my room. Irenya knows, Irenya was with me. He tried to take me with him as he did that day upon the road when Rupert saved me. And when I threatened to call you, he went, hinting of danger to Captain Lesendra. He meant that—I know he meant that! When I am gone, will you go to Vienna—help Danilo—Captain Lesendra—"

"Why not 'Danilo'?" he asked. "He is your kinsman."

The reminder hushed the girl to stillness. Her kinsman? Only by marriage; the marriage binding her to Stefan Balsic. Did he mean her to understand that? Was he trying to tell her what she dared not think? Suddenly she divined why he had said she was free; free, not to go, but to choose.

The empty silence in the room must be filled.

"Danilo," she accepted the relationship, just audibly. "You will help—Danilo—"

She was caught in the loosing of a force dwarfing any she had ever conceived, swept and held against Stefan Balsic's breast; his strong, delicate touch lifted her face to meet his eyes. Never had

Michael looked at her like that; never would any other man.

"I fought against you," he said, his voice strange to her. "As if you were an enemy, I have fought. For I have lived alone and thought to die so, until you came into my house. I warn you, Delight, I am no boy to spend my soul for your beauty. What you take from me, you must give again. I have loved no woman, I am not gentle. I warn you—if you cannot give me faith, and trust and love; if you cannot give heart and soul and honor—then go to your own people. For I will have no less."

The evening before, she would have understood; would have gauged the value and pathos of his difficult surrender. But now, after her night of self-torture, after the stinging smart of Michael's taunt of inconstancy, she saw in this only distrust of her, a reiterated charge of fickleness, and flared into such sudden wrath as she had once shown Lesendra. Flinging herself back against his arm, she set her hand upon his broad breast, forcing herself away.

"And the Frenchwoman?" she cried in bitterness and scorn. "You ask so much of me? You require first love for first love—let us be honest, then! I saw the Frenchwoman leave your car at Antivari the day I came. Oh, I speak the truth, at least!"

He drew back, releasing her; once again she saw his gray eyes harden like chilled metal.

"Take care, Delight," he warned very quietly.

But the reaction was upon her; the hurt of her own humiliation, the fierceness of all maiden things brought to capitulation, with unrecognized jealousy and real contempt for deceit.

"I saw her!" she flashed defiance. "Irenya told me she was here—with you. You thought I did not know, but I do, I do. I am not a child; I could have forgiven that; but to have you play this farce, this lesson of virtue to me—I will go; I will claim the divorce sooner than be your wife on sufferance. You shall not speak to me so and have me tamely stay."

"You shall not stay," said Stefan Balsic, in a tone that left her passion a mere tawdry sham. "There is a limit to my forgiveness, also. You are right; you cannot be my wife. When your friend Rupert returns, go with him. I will see that your divorce is arranged. I am leaving the castle; when I return, you will have gone. It is I who have the lesson."

At the door he turned once more toward where she stood, stupefied, in the middle of the room.

"This much for Danilo's honor: I had this morning a letter from his mother which justifies him in every act. You may be interested; I was

not. We do not require proof of faith, here; nor give it."

The heavy outer door shut with a sound of dull finality. The time between his coming and going was so brief that it seemed to the girl scarcely a moment since she had heard the door's opening. Giddy, Delight put her hands across her eyes; she had the sense of being dazzled by those gray eyes. He had looked—abruptly she fell down beside the divan and buried her face in her arms, sobbing passionately.

Through the open windows drifted sounds of action, the stamp of horses and voices of men. Rifle-butts rang martially on the stone pavement of the court. After a while Count Balsic's voice crossed the others, incisive, clear in authority. The girl sprang up and ran to the balcony, sheltering herself behind a vine-draped column.

She was seeing just that scene for the last time, by her own will. Delight knew the man would keep his word; he had truly told her he was no boy to move at a woman's caprice. With a strange, comprehensive avidity of gaze she embraced it all, all she had chosen to leave: the marvellous billows of those gray hills, the blinding blue and gold of sun and sky, the courtyard holding the brilliant group of mountain cavalry.

She had learned to recognize many of the men, under Irenya's tuition; knew little anecdotes of

them and thought of them as friends. The giant Petrovitch was holding the master's horse, his broad, good-humored countenance smiling with pleasure at the expedition. Stefan Balsic himself was standing in the arched doorway, watching the preparations. She could see no change in his schooled face; nothing to mirror the tempest shaking her.

Delight was no less angry than when she rejected all he had to offer, but she was utterly dismayed. She had not expected that answer to her accusation, that finality. She had vaguely anticipated explanations, excuses, perhaps. She had expected to be in the ascendancy, to re-establish her own pride: certainly not to be turned from his house and curtly ordered to get the divorce she had held up as a menace. And her accusation was just! That was what at once outraged and supported her. She was right—but he was going.

Why did he not speak? There grew upon the girl a frantic desire to hear him speak once more. Not to carry away the biting caustic of his last speech to her became an imperative need. Surely he would not leave without breaking his silence, if only by a word, a direction to his men!

It seemed that he would; that she was to be denied. The officer in charge during Lesendra's absence had finished his report, unintelligible and inaudible at that distance, and had drawn back.

Count Balsic slowly came forward and set his foot in the stirrup, taking the bridle from Petrovitch. Still he said nothing, not even when his gigantic follower stooped and kissed his hand as on the first morning the American had seen them together. Delight recalled that morning and her impressions as across an infinite distance. How unreal it had seemed, then; all that was now so much more real than all the rest of life! And now, too late, she had learned why Danilo had feared Stefan Balsic, because he loved him.

He was in his saddle; the little cavalcade wheeled and formed. He was going, in silence.

It was Irenya who innocently gave Delight her desire. The little maid suddenly appeared in the doorway, with her pretty, graceful obeisance. Count Balsic saw her and inclined his head kindly, with the smile that glanced across his grave face like a touch of sunshine across the Karst he loved. He uttered a sentence in his kinswoman's native Servian, then, and Irenya answered with the soft, prefaced "*Visosti*" the other girl had learned to translate as the noble's title.

He had spoken, and she had not understood. Her vision blurred by tears of passion and disappointment, Delight clung to the vine and watched her husband ride away. Less and less, the glittering riders dwindled smaller in her sight as they went, until they showed as a string of iridescent

beads against the barren mountain, and presently were gone.

After a long time, Irenya came to the balcony.

"I am to help you, Countess Délice," she said, her voice anxious, her blue eyes wondering and distressed. "Lord Stefan has declared that you go away from us, and return to America, across the seas."

Delight winced and shrank; she felt disgraced before the young girl, thrust out of the castle and rejected.

"I wish to go," she answered coldly, and knew herself contradicted by the plain evidence of recent weeping.

"So Lord Stefan said. When Mr. Rupert arrives, you will depart."

"He told you that?"

"Certainly yes, Countess Délice. Otherwise could I think of that grief of your going? Instructions for Mr. Rupert are also left."

"Very well," Delight consented listlessly. "Make ready, then. I will come."

Together, they began the dreary task of preparation to leave a place beloved. And this time there was no thought of return to help Delight; nothing to go seek elsewhere, since she left all here. With each gown folded and laid in the box, with slipper or trinket, came memories of when each was worn, and for whom. How had she ever fancied

she loved Michael, in the light of what she felt now? That pale, tepid sentiment which she had followed half around the world, that glamour of the eyes and senses and mist spun of her own illusions—what had it in common with the thing Stefan Balsic had brought to life in her?

When Irenya came to the gold-colored dress worn the night of Sir Robert Owen's visit, the night when she had thrown down the silver cup, Delight started from her chair, suffocating.

"Wait!" she bade desperately. "Wait, Irenya. I—pack no more, now."

"You will put on this frock, Countess Délice?" Irenya surveyed it with mournful interest, smoothing the brocade. "It is of a great dignity in which to travel, indeed; and the lace on that one which you wear is torn."

Yes, it was torn, where the thin fabric had caught upon Stefan's sleeve when he swept her into that strong embrace she had left for this desolation. At the recollection of his touch, his glance, the unutterable folly of what she had done and was doing rushed over her, submerging all else, even pride. They loved each other, as few human beings ever know love, prevented by their own limitations. What had the past to do with her? He had offered her the present and future. Suddenly it came to her that no woman of the type she had seen could have entered the sanctuary

he had opened for her, his wife. She had accused him of hypocrisy; he had forgotten such people existed, in baring his heart to her.

She would not go. She would await his return, and—yes, she would apologize.

"Unpack the boxes, Irenya," she commanded. "I am not going."

"Countess Délice?"

"I will stay here."

Irenya's face cleared to radiance, then clouded.

"Ah, Countess Délice—my lord has said—"

"What?" haughtily on the defensive.

"That you would go, with Mr. Rupert, before he returned."

"I have decided to stay."

"It is that one does not decide twice to Lord Stefan, even when one is dearly welcome," doubted the Montenegrin reluctantly, her eyes fixed on the gold-colored gown.

The question of the night before was answered; Irenya was a woman. And the girl-woman had overheard enough of Stefan Balsic's parting with his wife to render this judgment. Delight stared at her companion with a foreboding dread she vainly strove to tinge with incredulity. Was it possible he was so relentless in decision? Having set her outside the closed gates of his life, would he indeed refuse to re-open them? It was possible; she herself had called him unchanging, Danilo had

lived beside him in the knowledge that the first break in their friendship would be the last. She went to a chair near the window and sat down, turning her back to Irenya and her face to the wild stretches of mountain and valley.

There is a saying in Crnagora that only one road leads to each place. While road-building is of a difficulty and the uncompromising hills dangerous enough to make the rule generally true, there are exceptions, for the native. As Delight leaned there, vaguely seeking to trace the course of Stefan Balsic, she presently realized that he and his men had turned aside from the traveled way and ridden a trail across the naked Karst. The knowledge was brought home to her by the sight of another traveler who flashed into view on the road, far below the point where she had seen the riders fade from view.

The shining automobile was visible a long distance in that strong light. And it devoured distance like a famished thing, growing nearer by seconds. It was approaching at a speed reckless even for the reckless racing-driver; scudding like a leaf driven before some tempest of human need and urgency. From point to point it seemed to leap rather than roll, to stoop with the long swoop of a bird. Rupert was driving as he had never driven on track or course, as he might never drive again. While the girl looked, he cheated

lurking death not once, but at half a dozen turns where his wheels brushed its verge.

But to Delight his coming held only one meaning; she grasped nothing of the feat she witnessed or its effort. She saw in this arrival only the forcing of her decision between exile from Stefan or defiance of him. She was not ready to decide, and she fiercely rebelled against the chance which sent Rupert to the castle now when he was first unwelcome.

When the motor was near enough to be heard, Irenya ran to join her mistress at the window.

"It is the automobile! Countess Délice, he returns—Mr. Rupert returns! But," she shaded her eyes, "he is alone; Danilo is not with him."

She had forgotten Lesendra; Delight bent her head in shamed recognition of her own selfish absorption? Stefan had not; with clairvoyant certainty she divined where he had gone and knew he had left her to seek his kinsman, the kinsman of whose faith he had not required proof. Oh, he was right, right; she was too slight a creature to live beside these men!

"You will not need the guard, in his place," she said wearily. "I will make no more trouble in this house."

Irenya caught her hand, pressing it to heart and lips.

"You will not stay away too long? I shall

grieve from my heart; the walls will cry out after you, Countess Délice! Do not stay long; not too long."

"Suppose I stayed, forever?"

"How could that be, since the home of my lord, your husband, is here?" the girl asked with all innocence.

"We might be—divorced."

The ugly word was out. But Irenya did not appear shocked, merely puzzled.

"Divorced? What is that?"

"Why, breaking a marriage, ending it. The setting a man and woman free from each other. Surely you know?"

"I have heard of it, in books. But there is no such thing for our people or our church. The wicked Turks do so."

"I might have it done in my own country."

"You might do so, Countess Délice; certainly I cannot speak of those countries which I do not know. But that would not concern Lord Stefan, who is a Christian."

The automobile was at the castle, now. Rupert, bare-headed, dust-stained and dishevelled, was flinging himself out of the machine. Delight neither heeded nor cared. Her hand above her heart, she gazed at Irenya, whose blonde prettiness had assumed a madonna-like gravity of rebuke.

"You mean that if I am divorced from Count Balsic, he will not be set free?"

"How could he be set free from his promise before the good God, Countess Délice? That is a folly to imagine. Certainly he will be your husband while you live."

The simplicity of it! Had she been blind, not to see the fact? She had seen its proof, unrecognized, in Sir Robert's amazement the night she told him Count Balsic had promised her liberty; seen it in the odd glance of Rupert's black eyes and the reproach of Lesendra's look. They had all known it, all but her. Stefan Balsic, having taken her to serve his king, had himself accepted the after-burden and penalty. He would give back to her the freedom justly hers, while he lived bound to her shadow; wifeless, childless, the name he so valued carried on only through the dishonorable, unworthy Michael.

So much he would have done, not loving her; so much he had promised that first night on the mountain road. Now he was to endure all that, and more, while she wasted her life in equal loneliness on the other side of the barrier she herself had raised.

"I will not go," she heard her own voice saying aloud. "I will stay here. If I am to leave his house, he must send me himself. I will not go."

The knock on the door was imperative, impatient, loud to rudeness. Irenya moved forward, then fell back with a cry of surprise as Rupert strode into the room without ceremony or excuse.

"I ain't paying calls," he snapped, his dark face grim through stains of dust and fatigue, as the astonished Delight took a step toward him. "And I've got to talk to someone who'll get what I say. They tell me, as I make it, the chief of this outfit is away?"

"Yes. What is it? About—me?"

"No," he discouraged flatly. "The steward down there tried to hand me a bunch of gold coin and a letter about taking you to New York. There's the money," he crashed a small traveller's sack upon the nearest table. "Here's the letter, in my pocket; I ain't trying to kill time by reading, just now. I want enough real men, gun-men, to go back with me and clean out Michael Balsic's bungalow."

"Why? Rupert, what has happened? You have been *there*?"

"I guess there ain't any special need for detailed extra editions. I guess I don't want to talk about it!" He swept his hand across his grimy forehead, turning his hard black eyes away from the two young girls. "I want men to go get Lesendra out while he's alive and to lynch a thing that needs killing called Josef. I ain't including

his cousin, because Lesendra's entitled to kill him. If we get that one, I'll tie him to a tree myself and hand Lesendra the gun. And if Lesendra can't lift it, I'll shoot."

"Danilo?" Delight gasped. "He is hurt?"

"It's worse than that sounds. No; he's not dead," as the girl blanched. "I guess I've been pretty near wishing he was, once or twice. I said I didn't want to talk! There ain't time. I put over a trick that got me out of that place while Michael was busy somewhere else, and I left Lesendra there to come after help. Do I get it?"

"But why should Michael have done what you say?" Delight groped in the dark of her utter bewilderment and pain. "Danilo had kept his word—had helped him, even against Count Balsic. Why should he be so cruel?"

Rupert's scant patience gave out; he struck his hand against the table so violently that all the dainty feminine toys it held tinkled together and rolled, scattering.

"To make Lesendra talk!" he forced home the truth with snarling emphasis. "Helped Michael against Balsic, did he? Yes, that was the muck-raking story that sent him into the drive across there after proof he hadn't sold out for graft. Well, he did give Michael what he had to, to keep his mother out of a Russian prison. He's paid for it, I guess. If it's any pleasure to know

it, he's been down into hell and back again rather than give Michael any of Count Balsic's private plans to sell to Austria. Josef gave up trying to make him talk, at two o'clock last night; I ain't supposing you know Josef well enough to know what that means, but if Lesendra's got any yellow streaks in him, they're solid gold. I'm going."

He swung on his heel and went toward the door, rage an electric aura around his small, upright figure, gallantry forgotten.

"Rupert," Delight appealed. "Rupert!"

But Irenya crossed the room with a lithe movement swifter than the man's and was between Rupert and the door before he could leave. Flinging out her arms, she grasped the frame on either side to bar his exit; her handsome head thrown back, the broad yellow braids shaken by the rise and fall of the bosom across which they fell, her blue eyes flashing, she faced him like a superb young barbarian.

"You shall not say I held evil beliefs of Danilo!" she stormed, submissive training set at defiance. "Untrue to Lord Stefan he could not be, no; and there are no cowards in our house. He would die; he would die silently. Lord Stefan knows it, who loves him. I know it, who love him *not!*"

Rupert surveyed her, sarcasm and contempt dying out of his expression. He ran his fingers

through his crisp black curls, grayed by dust, hesitated, then nodded.

"You're right. As for not loving your brother, I guess you mixed what you tried to say. Let me by; I'm coming back, after I get him, to ask if you'll give me what he did."

"Certainly I will keep what he promised. But my brother he is not, only my cousin whom it was decided I should marry."

"Marry—Lesendra?"

The question was mechanical; he read its confirmation and her innocence of deceit in the candid face fronting his gaze. Swift of thought as of hand, his intelligence unravelled the whole skein of error.

"You did not know?" Delight exclaimed, stricken by the change in him. "Rupert, forgive us; we never dreamed you did not. Irenya, speak to him!"

But Rupert drew back from both women, his expression locked.

"I guess I ain't the one who needs pitying," he signified drily. "Danilo Lesendra not having enough to stand last night, I exerted myself to help Josef by telling him I'd been stealing his girl while he was away."

"Rupert?"

"I told him I wanted to marry his sister. And

instead of asking someone to choke me, he told me to take word back that he gave her to me."

Irenya's face caught reflections from the wings of the morning, her eyes misted like blue lakes at dawn. She missed no romance in the blunt statement, felt no resentment at the disposal of herself, unasked. Her hands slipped from the door; unashamed, with no thought of flight or affectation, she gave her new lover a full glance. And the first gift she brought him was comfort.

"Certainly it is not for your excellency to grieve for Danilo in that thing," she said, while Delight still faltered, dumb. "For Danilo was to marry me because Lord Stefan desired it, and not choosing me of himself. In that giving me was no pain to him. And now you will go bring him home, because like him you are brave, and I will wait."

Jack Rupert looked at the girl; what came into his black eyes was for her alone. Straightening himself, he again gave her the curt nod that meant an understanding better than sentiment.

"You're right, again," he pronounced briefly. "I'm going after him. And I'm man's-size enough not to touch his girl until I get him. But I guess I'm able to say all I want is the little sport who can send a man to the track like that, instead of begging him to stay in where it's nice and safe. I ain't saying good-by, for I'm coming back."

Irenya drew aside from the door with the uplifted head and proud eyes of an obedient princess, giving him her graceful salute. Delight recovered herself just in time to prevent the departure.

"Wait!" she bade, starting forward. "Rupert, no one can help you but us. You are wrong, indeed you are wrong to think I distrust Danilo, or that Count Balsic ever did. He has gone now to find Danilo— Oh, that mistake is my fault, too! I believed Michael; Count Balsic has gone to seek him in Vienna."

"Vienna?"

"Yes. Michael was here in the dawn; he must have ridden here after the man you call Josef found they could learn nothing from Danilo. I believed him, and sent Count Balsic where he told me Danilo had gone."

"Pardon if I tell you that is not so," Irenya objected. "Lord Stefan does not take his men on those foreign journeys, Countess Délice; also he rode into the mountains, not down to those cities where are trains and ships. To Vienna he has not gone, but elsewhere."

"I didn't meet him," Rupert volunteered. "Give me all the men here, and I'll hurry back, then."

"There are none, excellency; none to make war on that village. They went with Lord Stefan."

The three regarded each other. What, indeed,

could the few men at their command hope to achieve of success in attacking that sullen population Rupert knew so well? And what would an unsuccessful attempt mean to Lesendra?

"There could be a letter sent to the commander at Podgoritza, asking for his soldiers," suggested Irenya.

"Send one of the men down with it, on a chance," Rupert approved the idea, but his face did not lighten. "I ain't denying I think it won't be in time."

"Are they—" Delight hesitated, pressing her handkerchief against her unsteady lips. "Will they—injure Danilo, while you are here?"

"When I left, they had given up and Michael had gone off; here, I suppose. I told Josef my motor-car had a leak in its gasoline-tank and I was surprised it hadn't blown up and wrecked the place already. I said another day in the hot sun would do it, sure, and I hated to lose the machine. I offered him the gold watch presented to me by my racing club, if he'd take me out and let me turn off the gas."

"He believed you?"

Rupert put his fingers absently into his waistcoat pocket.

"He wasn't brought up in a garage, and I've talked to him before about that car's exploding. He took the watch."

"You escaped?"

"He guessed I couldn't get away as long as he didn't let me get near the front of the machine to crank the motor." A flicker of exquisite reminiscence crossed the keen anxiety of the racing-driver's expression. "That car has an electric self-starter. I couldn't get him under the wheels, but the mud-guard got him in the back as we jumped. He was still lying down when I looked back. Does your commander speak English, Miss Irenya?" as the girl placed writing materials before him.

"No, excellency."

"French?" Delight questioned.

"I do not know, Countess Délice."

"I'll dictate what to say, you say it, and Miss Irenya will write it in the right language," Rupert arranged. "I want to get back; make it short."

"You are going back, alone?" Delight marvelled. "What can you do?"

"I don't see any army here to escort me. I'll find out what to do on the way. Are you ready?"

Delight fulfilled her part in the triple composition as a mechanical effort. She was shaking off the dazed numbness of shock and commencing to think. And by the light of her new knowledge of Michael, she discerned the way to help Danilo.

She dictated the letter as from herself, Stefan Balsic's wife, and signed it with her first use of her

married name. Delight Balsic, she signed, and drew fresh courage from the writing. When she laid down the pen, she looked at the other two with clear, resolute eyes.

"Send a rider with the letter, Irenya," she directed, mistress of herself and of her husband's house. "Rupert, I am going with you. No, do not refuse. You have no right to refuse Danilo Lesendra that chance; the only chance he has until Count Balsic comes home. We cannot fight with Michael, but I can give him all he hoped to gain from his cousin, in money. I will buy Danilo's life of him."

The commercial simplicity of the plan appealed to the ultra-modern Rupert, setting him on his own ground of practicality. His eyes brightened; although he shook his head a moment later.

"If he lets Lesendra go, after what's been done and said, this country wouldn't let him live," he reluctantly considered. "He has told Lesendra too much to turn him loose without getting locked up, himself. I ain't informed about what this country does to men who do what Mr. Dreyfus didn't, but it's due across the mountain."

"But he need not be in this country! He could live in Paris, anywhere in Europe. I know he hates Montenegro; if he had money enough to live where he chose, he would not care to come here. Remember that now Michael has nothing, yet you

are free and can do all against him that Danilo could. Rupert, it is a chance, one chance!"

"It would take a big price."

"I will give all I have, all!" she cried, in sudden passion. "If I can buy Danilo safe, I will go poor all my life and be content. If you will not take me, I will go alone. I brought this on him; I carried home Michael's false charge, I had Michael here in this room last night and let him go back to this dreadful work; I told Count Balsic that Danilo was in Vienna and sent him out of our reach. Rupert, take me with you—let me do this one good before I leave this country where I have done only harm."

Rupert had the tact to look away as she swept the handkerchief across her eyes. Having no knowledge of the earlier scene of the morning, he had no clue to the varying moods which swayed her from apparent coldness to this heat. But he understood that he had misjudged her in supposing her indifferent to Lesendra.

"I ain't refusing," he conceded to the plea. "And it's the chance you say. But I've seen enough of Michael not to take a lady near him. Lesendra himself wouldn't have it."

"Michael would not harm me, now. I—" even in that moment, the blood burned into her cheeks, "I have learned that he cared for my wealth, not for me; well, I will give it to him. He wants

nothing else of me. And I am an American, too! I will be in the car with you, and safe. No, he will be intent on more important things; himself in danger. You can tell him we have left the evidence against him with Irenya, who will use it if we do not come back."

"Are you considering whether Count Balsic will be specially pleased when he gets home?"

"He will not," Irenya interpolated, with conviction.

"He will not care," Delight corrected drearily. "I am to go to America and we are to be divorced. It does not matter to him."

Rupert's lips drew and pinched. The disapproval in his dark face was scarcely less strong than Irenya's had been. But he made no comment at all, except to glance at Irenya with a self-congratulation plain as speech. Delight saw and translated it without resentment, too proud to attempt a justification of herself.

"I will be down before you are ready to leave," she decided the question of her going. "Will you wait for me in the courtyard?"

"I'll be there," Rupert yielded brusquely.

Irenya followed him. Delight turned away to find motor wraps and the bank-book which had been a useless possession since she came to this land.

With that clearing of her mind anger against Stefan had returned; her resolution to stay had

faded. No, she would not stay, live under Irenya's rebuking eyes; perhaps to have Stefan coldly send her away, after all, or, still more humiliating and more probable, place his house at her disposal with the frigid courtesy which could make him aloof as if she was across the world. Meanwhile, there was Danilo.

Opposite the silver-framed mirror she stopped once more. She had learned to love it with a personal affection, as a legendary possession making real those quaint, dim tales Irenya told. She knew the story of that heavy dent in the metal, made by the knife of a serf who had crept into the Muscovien palace to kill and who had failed because the loyal glass showed the assassin's silent approach. She knew the three silver rings across its top had been set there seventy years before to hold the black curtain one lovely lady ordered hung before it, never to be drawn until her death, when she rose from illness and it showed her loveliness forever gone. Delight had liked to fancy her own portrait in that unseen gallery. Now the mirror would show Irenya's face alone, for how many days, or years?

Or, would it? The doubt was so sharp and disagreeable that it struck through the girl like a physical pang. Who next would reflect youth and beauty, sheen of hair and lustre of eyes in the looking-glass of Marya Feodorovna? What right

had she, the deserting wife, to exact even in fancy that Stefan Balsic should live like an anchorite?

When Irenya re-entered the room, Delight spoke in an oddly strained voice.

"Irenya, if—if that Frenchwoman comes here again, after I am gone, take away my mirror. I was—I am Count Balsic's wife, the Princess Marya was his mother—I do not want that woman to use it. Have it taken away, or covered. And I will always love you, Irenya. If Rupert brings you to America, we will find each other there, dear."

"But you cannot go there without Lord Stefan, Countess Délice," Irenya declared patiently. "All such speech is a folly. And that French lady of whom you speak was never in these rooms, nor do I see why she should come again. Very grateful she was to Lord Stefan, I have heard. Old Sofia cared for her that night; I being told that to her I should not speak, by Danilo bringing that word from my lord."

Delight gripped the edge of the dressing-table, looking into her own wide eyes mirrored in the glass.

"That night?"

"Certainly the only night she was here, Countess Délice. Often I had seen her ride past with the brother of Lord Stefan, since the road to the valley passes here. But that night before you came, she came to the castle all in the dark

and demanded Lord Stefan. In the courtyard she stood, and her eyes were hot, and her beautiful dress all dust, and one side of her face was white and red, and the other all black with a great bruise. 'Your brother has a new fancy, Monsieur le Comte,' she said. 'Is there one gentleman in your family, or must I ride down these mountains to-night?' I was there—I heard. So she was Lord Stefan's guest, and had dinner with him and Danilo; where she was gay and smoked cigarettes, I have heard, and laughed much. But Sofia said that she walked up and down the floor all night, in her room. So next morning she went down to Antivari in the limousine automobile with Danilo."

The woman had come from Michael's house. Dismissed, as Delight could reconstruct the events now, because Michael had received the unexpected news that his American bride was coming to join him. For this, she herself had lost Stefan Balsic! Delight closed her eyes, and met again the glance in which Stefan had flung wide for her the shut portals of his reticent life of splendid ambition and inner solitude. Forgiveness? Now that she knew what she had done, his wife did not think of asking it. She had destroyed a marvellous thing; one does not excuse destruction.

"Countess Délice, you are ill! Let me go with you."

The sound of the motor-horn below warned

her that Rupert had completed his preparations and waited in consuming anxiety and haste. Yes, at least she could save one love for Stefan; she could give him back Danilo, who did not waver or answer confidence with insult. She caught Irenya in her arms, kissing her in sisterhood.

"Tell Lord Stefan everything, if he comes," she urged. "Goodby, my dear, my dear!"

Rupert was in his car, ready to start. He swung the girl into the seat beside him, looked once at the balcony where Irenya leaned, a pink and gold figure in the sun, and the automobile leaped roaring toward the roads it had just left.

CHAPTER XIX

The Beggar's Jewel

The road to Michael Balsic's house plunged into the mountains like a wound. It was old, very old. Where the wheels of the Americans' motor-car rolled on the journey that was to forestall death, death was familiar as sun or rain. Here where had passed and pass still the feet of men on the blood-trail, where Christian has died with Moslem, Montenegro breasted the red flood of the East and the greed of her neighbor, the life of Danilo Lesendra seemed a small pebble dropped into the stern gorges whose ramparts of defence were reared of countless such individual lives. He himself held it so; held life, not as a treasure to be hoarded and guarded with covetous fear of loss, but as a weapon put in his hand to use for a while. And as she rode on that wild journey, something of his spirit came to Delight; the frank, steady readiness for the day's apportioned events that was not bravado, but a simplicity that reduced living to the simple primitiveness called peace of mind. This was a place where small emotions shrivelled away, as even the scant shrubbery had been burned away from the great rocks that

thrust peak and shoulder up against the sun. Only rock survived.

It was a silent voyage. Once only Rupert broke the reserve in which he had wrapped himself; that was when a long stretch of comparatively secure road freed his attention from the machine, and in a few laconic sentences he related the story he had given his word should reach Stefan Balsic. From that Delight knew he had doubts of his own return. She told him of the explanation Lesendra's mother had sent, too late, too long delayed.

When Rupert finally halted the machine, his companion could see no break in the wild desolation around them. But the driver had fixed his landmarks, and merely nodded reassurance in answer to her look of surprise.

"We're there," he declared briefly. "No, you can't see the town until you take that turn ahead. I ain't specially timid, but I like to look where I'm going. There is what they call a path along this heap of stone over the place; I've seen it, on my first visit. I guess we'll be more likely to drive back ourselves instead of being taken by a procession in black, if I stroll along there and see my ground first."

"Take me with you," Delight urged. "I may see some way to help you; I do not want to stay alone."

With some reluctance, he helped her to descend.

"I want to put you somewhere," he told her. "I guess it's a good time to say I won't drive in there with a lady if I can help it. But you ain't dressed for a climb up the rocks."

She looked down at her white frock with its knotted blue ribbons, her high-heeled white shoes and light silk coat. No, she was not dressed for the expedition; she was wrong, as she had been wrong in everything since she came to this country. She could have shed childish tears at her own futility and uselessness. Only one place she could have filled, and she had refused even that to Stefan Balsic.

"It does not matter," she put aside the issue. "I can go where you go. I will manage."

Rupert's expression took a lesser shade of discontent.

"All right," he accepted the promise.

Her hand on his arm, they made their way along a cleft in the mountain that left a natural path. Delight's small feet slipped on the loose stones, the ascent was sharp and the heat suffocating, but she made no complaint; obeying her companion's low-voiced cautions as to avoiding noise and keeping in the shadow of the rocks.

The cleft ended just above the settlement, on the side of the steep slope. A huge boulder al-

most masked the path's emerging; no doubt it had been the secret way of many a retreat, in older times, and the scene of many a desperate stand or sortie. Now it served the two Americans as a shelter for reconnoitering.

There was a change in the village to Rupert's eyes; a difference at first hard to determine. The poor houses stood ranged along the ledge of cliff, as always, with an unkempt dejection upon them. As always, men lounged about the little inn, gathered around a table in the open air and drinking the wretched white brandy. Just below the end of the cleft was the house of Michael Balsic, closed and inscrutable. But presently the American located one element of change.

"What do you see?" Delight questioned, in a whisper. They were so close that only the unknown language prevented them from distinguishing what the men said.

"It's what I don't see. I'm busy looking for women or children, and I don't get them."

"There are none—not one! What does that mean?" She leaned lower. "What is that glittering—that long bulky mass covered with cloth except for one line across which the sun strikes and glints? There, beside the largest house! It is covered with cloaks—look, that lame man has just covered the spot which showed."

"I ain't able to say what it is, but the lame

man is Josef. He wasn't lame before my car slipped, indicating I've got a real efficient machine. But I can see that a place the women have left won't do for the lady with me."

"But—" she began protest.

"I can act as your agent and sign contracts for you," he silenced her. "All I've been wondering for the last ten miles is what sanitarium I'd better join to cure whatever ails me that I brought you at all. I'm feeling better in time to keep you out of sight. I'm leaving you here while I go put through the deal."

Delight was learning. Once she would have combated the determination which eliminated her; now she yielded to the experience of the man. She drew the bank-book from her dress and gave it to him.

"All that is there," she offered. "But that is little, of course, to what I have in other forms than money. If he will wait, I will arrange with my uncle in America to give more—ten times what you see. Only bring Danilo, dear Rupert! See, I signed these blank checks at the castle; you can fill them out."

Rupert took the little book without enthusiasm.

"That's the second one of these I've seen offered to Michael," he commented, turning the leaves. "The other time didn't work."

"Who—?"

"Lesendra. But there wasn't much in his; we'll try. I'm going back to the machine. Will you come, and wait there?"

"I will wait here, where I can see. If I find you are succeeding, I will climb back to the end of the path and meet you and Danilo at the road."

"Miss Irenya couldn't do better," he approved. He hesitated, looking at the village. "I guess I'd better pass along the advice Lesendra gave me, last night; whatever you see, keep quiet. If anything goes wrong, wait until help comes from the castle."

She held out her hand for his clasp of farewell, then watched him disappear into the cleft mountain. In America they would never have passed beyond the slight contact chance brought at race-track or aviation meet between the professional sportsman and the girl who looked on as at all the offered amusements of an obsequious world. Here, they had become friends, and the dominant masculine was in command.

The sound of a running torrent was in her ears, as she leaned there in the shadow of the boulder, with the burning sun-rays vibrant all around her shelter. For a moment it seemed to her confusion that she heard the cataract at home, beside the castle and the arcade, that presently she would hear Irenya singing. But soon she recognized

that the roaring water was far below—a river pouring through the deep gorge or cañon which bordered the other side of the road and the ribbon-narrow settlement. The dark lip of that gorge was visible to her, but not its depth.

Her attention was singularly held by that shawl-covered bulk beside the house she knew to be Michael's. It loomed with a sinister persistence in the foreground of her thoughts. Why did the limping man Rupert named Josef and loathed remain always near the thing, and seem to watch it jealously? It was strange; strange as this coming of hers to Michael's house, so long the goal of her heart. She had reached it, that goal; not to bring her dower of maiden love and trust, but to bargain with money for a life he had taken into his cruel keeping; to crouch in the rocks in fear of his treachery. Delight closed her eyes, waiting in the dark until Rupert should come.

It seemed a long time before the pant of the motor came, startling her to attention and suspense. It startled the men below into action, also; almost as if the sound had been a prearranged signal for them, long anticipated. Their movement was prompt and concerted, one and all abandoned whatever they had in hand and turned to the head of the village where stood the master's house. Men left glasses half-filled, sentences half-spoken to join their companions in that retreat.

They did not mass as for defence or attack, but around or within the building, disappearing from the view of an approaching visitor. But Josef remained beside the covered object, where two others came to stand with him in a lounging affectation of carelessness and ease. Lastly, Michael himself appeared in the doorway.

He looked keenly expectant; that first struck the watching girl. He appeared tensely alert, with an animation that restored the freshness and color of the man she had known in New York. The fatigue she had seen before dawn was no longer in his face, he was carefully, even fastidiously redressed in riding costume. He had the air of a host waiting to receive a visit, as he stood before his house.

Rupert drove into the village without undue speed and came to a stop at easy conversational distance from Michael's position. Leaning back in his seat, he crossed his arms with the relaxation following his long drive, and surveyed his late captor without apparent emotion. Delight saw Josef, from his post at one side, scowl venomously, then glance down at the object in his charge and smile with his evil drawing of lip and brow. Michael smiled also, but at his guest.

"Good day, Mr. Rupert of New York," he greeted pleasantly. "You left us abruptly."

"It ain't my opinion that any day has a

good-conduct medal pinned on it, that brings me near you," drawled Rupert. "I guess I remember telling you something like that, before. Yes, I hurried away, and I've hurried back, on business."

"Business, cherished friend?"

"It ain't pleasure. You've got what I want to buy."

"And what may that be? This country estate of mine?"

"Danilo Lesendra."

Michael's brows lifted. Evidently surprised, he paused.

"That is, what you've left of him, if he's still alive," Rupert added, with grim meaning.

"My brother sent you on this errand?"

"Your sister-in-law," was the dry correction. "When Count Balsic comes, I guess he'll try a different way."

"He is coming?" eagerly.

"He didn't say. In fact, he wasn't home when I got there. But the lady was. She sent me to offer money that's warranted to give more satisfaction than even your sweet nature is likely to get out of murdering Lesendra. He has given a demonstration that ought to convince you he won't talk. He's no use to you, and we want him."

"Have you brought the money with you?"

"I'm from New York," said Rupert.

Michael meditated. The offer was one he had not foreseen, and its possibilities were varied.

"There are difficulties in the way of Cousin Danilo's freedom," he objected. "If he will not talk for me, he will talk of me."

"As for that, Montenegro is going to be a place you won't enjoy, anyhow," returned his antagonist, imperturbably. "Lesendra ain't the only man with a tongue. I've got one myself; and I didn't come back here without leaving all the information I had with my friends in the castle, where it would do the most good. It's all up, Lieutenant. You've got to travel, and travel quick. Hand over Lesendra, and I'll give you travelling expenses. I guess no one's likely to follow you out of this country, if we get him."

The two men measured each other in a long regard.

"He will follow me," Michael signified. "Will you have a cigarette, Mr. Rupert? No? Indulge me, then. Yes, Danilo is a slave to his word; he spoke of killing me."

"Meaning you're afraid of him in a fair fight? He don't fight any other way."

"I am full of faults, but no one has ever called me a coward. I am equal to our Danilo, on most occasions. No, I merely suggest that I should be compensated for that risk, also." He tossed away

the match. "What am I bid for my cousin, Mr. Rupert? Your argument is irresistible!"

Rupert contemplated the blue sky of late afternoon.

"Five thousand dollars would be twenty-five thousand francs; a young fortune in Paris. They tell me you ain't displeased with that town."

Michael laughed aloud.

"What, from an American millionaire for her favorite kinsman? Begin at ten times that!"

"Can't be done."

"She has a million of your valuable dollars. I have been in your city, my friend; I am informed."

"It ain't stacked in banks, though. Money ain't kept in cold storage. You ought to know that."

The Montenegrin did know it. He paused, studying the impassive Rupert.

"How much has she available?" he demanded bluntly.

"If you want to do business in American style, instead of wasting time, all right. She has fifty thousand in cash. I'll give you half; last offer."

"No more than that?"

"Fortunes are over-rated fierce," agreed the other.

Michael hesitated. In a torture of suspense, the hidden girl above them clenched her hands on

the hard rock, not feeling its roughness. What did Rupert mean by playing this way? Had she not bidden him give, pledge her whole fortune? She wanted to cry out to him, to cry her own offer of all, everything for Danilo. But she compelled herself to silence. Why did Michael look so strangely at Josef, delaying his answer until some intelligence had passed between them?

"Very well," he accepted, finally. "Give me the fifty thousand, Mr. Rupert."

"I told you—"

"All of it!" Michael momentarily threw off lightness for ugly emphasis. "Come, finish; or I keep Danilo. How have you it—a check? Draw it, then. Wait; what security have I it will be honored?"

Rupert took out the bank-book and a fountain-pen his expression caustic.

"Do you happen to remember trying to put through a graft deal with an aviator, on a flight to Rome?" he inquired deliberately. "Because if you do, I was the one. And if you're able to recall how the bribe didn't work, I guess you have the best security about any deal I'm in that I can put up here."

Michael started, then shrugged and laughed, bowing ironic apology.

"And I failed to recognize you! Abominable! All apologies, Mr. Rupert; I am content."

"I ain't, yet. This thing I'm writing won't be done until I see Lesendra. And if I don't bring him home with me, the lady will see that the bank don't pay."

Michael smiled curiously. His eyes had suddenly narrowed; his whole expression altered. He spoke a swift sentence to Josef in his own language, adding a command which sent the other two men into the house. Folding his arms, he nodded to the American, who had stopped writing to regard him.

"Finish, Mr. Rupert, finish! You shall see Danilo. When the check is presented, the lady will have no desire to complain of it. Her interest will be elsewhere."

"Meaning—?"

"Write. I have sent for Danilo."

He was not looking at Rupert, but past him. From her shelter Delight followed that gaze, and barely stifled a cry. For where had been the barren gray of road and cliffs, the sun now found a brightness of color and gleam of metal. Stefan Balsic and his men were coming, by that shorter trail across the mountains over which Michael had ridden the night before. She had not been mistaken in her reading of Stefan's purpose; he had sought Danilo, but not where she supposed. Now surely all danger was over! Trembling with excitement and joy, Delight looked below and caught the rock for support in the second shock of ex-

quisite relief and exultation. Lesendra had appeared in the doorway of the house.

At first glance, the young officer was not outwardly changed except for his extreme pallor. But the look of the boy who dreamed dreams, the softness which had lingered in his expression, a morning-mist of youth, was wiped from his face forever. Yet he carried his fair head like a victor; the worn sternness so strange in him admitted no humiliation to his enemy, confessed nothing to gratify malice. He was not bound or secured in any way; after an instant Delight comprehended that it was not necessary; he leaned heavily on the arm of the man beside him. Wincing as if the suffering were her own, she watched his glance pass over Josef and Michael with no recognition of their existence, not even granting them contempt, and rest on Rupert.

All Rupert's impassivity could not mask the relief with which he saw Lesendra living, and the bargain near conclusion in apparent good faith. He ripped the check from the book at once.

"Come over here, Lesendra,"—he cloaked emotion in brusqueness. "You're ransomed. When he's beside me, Lieutenant, we're square. Here's your price; it will be paid if I have to fix it myself. I ain't denying I want to start back, if you'll hurry."

The curious quality in Michael's expression

became more pronounced; he made no move to advance toward the proffered check.

"Do you come over here, Mr. Rupert," he advised. "It will be wiser. Of all governments, I least desire to provoke that paternal and persistent one of yours."

"Intending—what?"

"Believe me, only good."

The American paused, then slipped out of his car coolly enough. There was no use of objection; Michael could easily take the check by force, if he so desired, in any case. He crossed to Lesendra, holding out his right hand to his friend while his left delivered the strip of paper to its new owner.

"Come over to the machine," he urged. "What—"

Lesendra had caught his breath sharply, his hot fingers gripped Rupert's, then thrust him away.

"Go back!" he exclaimed imperiously. "Go back to your car. Leave me—turn them back! Do not let them enter the pass. Go!"

"What do you mean?" Rupert snapped, wheeling.

He was too late. Josef seized his wrist; two of the men caught him by either arm, holding him a prisoner. Michael laughed even while he turned on Lesendra.

"*Mirno*, cousin! They are in range. Lift your voice like that again, and Josef will fire!

Be silent, I tell you; they are in the trap. Do you think I would have let you be here, otherwise?"

For the first time Rupert saw the approaching riders, now entering the straight stretch of road that ran between mountain and gorge toward the house, and comprehended the warning Lesendra would have had him give.

"It's a fight, I guess," he appraised the situation. "Well, I don't suppose our friends rode over here to attend prayer-meeting, nor that they ain't qualified to compete with these pirates. You're taking it too hard."

Lesendra looked at him, his blue eyes burning with fever and a desperation the last night had not brought to them, then nodded to that cloak-covered bulk in the shadow of the house, where Josef again stood.

"A machine-gun trained down the pass," he said, his voice dulled by exhaustion and oddly unfamiliar. "Stefan cannot suspect that. God knows where they got it, or how they brought it here! Michael will sweep clean in one discharge. There is no escape, for any of them."

Rupert stared incredulously at Michael, who made a gesture of easy confirmation hardly supported by his expression, where strain and excitement could no longer be concealed.

"I have long been ready, Mr. Rupert," he explained. "Of course, when I returned this morn-

ing and found you had escaped, I supposed you had gone to Stefan; who would have had the frontiers closed against my retreat and have brought his men here to wrest Danilo from me. Well, I have no desire to meet the justice of Stefan; on the contrary, I made ready to fight, or to resist attack. I warn you, cousin; give the alarm and we fire at once! That is better! I would have welcomed your bargain, and kept it, Mr. Rupert, had you been three hours earlier."

"Are you figuring you can get away after this?"

"I can no other way. For the last time, I caution you both; at the first signal Josef has orders to end danger."

The riders were within a few hundred feet. Michael stepped forward, facing the leader.

"Halt!" he gave warning. "No closer, Stefan, if you would speak with me."

Count Balsic reined his horse to a standstill in unhurried compliance, holding out his gloved hand in command to his men to halt also.

"I have come for my officer, Michael," he stated, with his calm, measured authority. "If that is Danilo in the shadow of your doorway, he must come with me and return to his place."

"What, the treacherous Danilo? Danilo, whom I bought? Are you still concerned with him,

Stefan, or have you come to arrest him? He is under my protection, now."

The ungenerous thrust failed of effect, except for Lesendra's gasp of pain. Count Balsic's gray glance remained unstirred, as he looked down at the man in the road.

"There is no treachery in Danilo Lesendra; nor have I ever so supposed," he answered. "He has need of no man's protection, who is his own. Nevertheless, he is my officer and must return with me. Bid him come here."

"What if he is my prisoner, since you will not believe him my ally?"

"You are in no position to take prisoners, Michael," was the stern rebuke. "If you were not of my blood and name, you would yourself be the King's prisoner. Take now the notice I meant to give you a week later; your work in this country is ended, your life here over. Send Danilo to me, withdraw your disgrace from Crnagora, and I will shelter you from punishment. Refuse, and the matter goes to the King."

"I am too much of your blood to be humble, Stefan. Phrase your offer differently."

"It is spoken."

The two brothers regarded each other in a silent duel of wills; behind one his superb, cool-eyed soldiers, the other supported by Josef and the cloaked thing in the shadows.

"The Count will make it!" Rupert confided, *sotto voce*, at his companion's ear. "We're out of danger and sitting up. Michael will weaken and clear out with the money."

Lesendra looked at the other. The pain and bitterness had gone from his clear eyes; Stefan Balsic had held a cup to his lips that quenched fever and left the steady resolution of all his life.

"What fluttered white on the slope?" he questioned, just audibly to the American. "Beside that boulder?"

"The Countess is there; came with me."

Lesendra leaned a little more heavily on the arm of the man who at once guarded and supported him; his head drooped as if in faintness or exhaustion. But from beneath his lowered lashes his eyes lost nothing of the tableau set like a stage scene in the strong sunlight.

"If I make a change in your plans, we may agree on peace," Michael slowly conceded. "I have my good moments, dear Stefan! If I send our Danilo and Mr. Rupert out to their automobile, which you observe, will you follow them back to your castle and give your much-valued word that I shall be allowed to leave Montenegro unmolested?"

"Yes."

"And that you will leave Danilo's account for Danilo's settlement with me?"

"Arrange that with him. What he asks of me, I shall give."

Michael smiled. He knew there was nothing Lesendra would not forego to see Stefan Balsic leave that trap alive.

"Agreed!" he closed the truce. "Take home your victory, Stefan; I have my satisfaction, too."

He bowed a salute of affected gravity, and had retraced a dozen steps toward the house when an idea checked him. He faced back.

"Ah—of course the passport from Montenegro includes my devoted followers and good Josef?"

"It does not," was the decisive reply.

"What, they are to stay when I go?"

"They will have a trial; a trial by the law to which they submitted themselves when they took the oath of allegiance to Crnagora. The man you call Josef is an Austrian agent and spy; he will be dealt with accordingly."

Michael's blond face lost its pretense of gayety.

"You under-rate me, Stefan! What, because I have not what you and Danilo call honor, you suppose I have none? I am to save myself and desert these good people of mine? I decline."

"You will go to trial with them, then. This nest of treason shall not be rebuilt across the border."

"Is that your final word, Stefan?"

"It is."

Michael turned.

"Josef—," he summoned.

Lesendra sprang from his unprepared guard in one supreme effort that concentrated all his remaining strength. Against Josef he dashed himself, forcing the Austrian from his place by the shock, while pointing toward the hill.

"The Countess!" he sent his last call to Stefan Balsic, his voice ringing through the defile. "She falls—go to her, Stefan!"

The startling unexpectedness and urgency of the cry succeeded, Count Balsic lifted his head, saw Delight rise swaying to her feet beside the boulder, and wheeled his horse up the slope toward her.

The time gained was a mere instant; the abrupt leap aside the one move that promised life, as Lesendra had foreseen. Rupert, struggling with his captors, saw Josef recover his place at the cannon, thrusting the officer aside. He saw Danilo Lesendra, forced to his knee by the blow, throw back his head, his blue eyes laughing challenge, as Michael swung toward him and shot his cousin through the heart. With the lesser report, the Austrian fired.

In the narrow place the effect was frightful. Halfway up the slope Stefan Balsic's horse fell, carrying his rider down with him. Amid the roar and scream of rushing iron, Delight's world went out as she slipped to the rocks.

CHAPTER XX

The Red Pass

Where Delight had fallen, she awoke. She started out of stupor, terribly conscious; not dazed, but too mercilessly sane and clear in memory. They were dead, those splendid soldiers she had known; Danilo was dead, perhaps Rupert —and Stefan? She covered her eyes from where she had seen horse and rider fall. Yet, there she must go and look. Like Edith the Fair, she must seek love on the field yielded to death. Why had she escaped? Why did this country refuse her all gifts, even its swift end that was the final gift? She was not harmed by the flying death; she was strong as a man in fever, strong as if her body urged her to some work. She must go down; because she dared not look where she must read, the girl lifted her face to the cliffs and the graying evening sky.

Above her the rock jutted out, overhanging and overlooking road and pass and the dark gorge through which the river poured. There above her Stefan Balsic knelt on one knee, blood dripping from his shoulder, his left arm hanging useless at his side, and strove with his right hand to sight and steady his long, heavy, army pistol.

It seemed to his wife that her soul tore itself

from her body to rush toward him. She was up the ascent without conscious effort, with the sure swiftness of a mountain woman; somehow she was on the tiny plateau with him.

"Stefan!" she panted, sobbing in her unbearable gladness, too quickly following despair. "Oh God, you live!"

He looked at her, and there was no softness in his gray eyes.

"Why were you here?" he asked, his voice harsh.

"To help Danilo—our cousin. Believe me!"

He pointed down the pass.

"There goes his murderer; traitor and assassin—goes to bring public dishonor on our name upon the scaffold. My hand shakes."

She understood. Delight Warren, of New York and Paris, convent-bred, of the gentle world, sank down beside the man of the Karst and held out her arm, delicate and steady as a bar of ivory.

"Rest your hand there," she bade, her eyes on his face.

The single shot cracked down the defile where the machine-gun had volleyed. Far down the path, the last rider of the departing company threw wide his arms and reeled from his saddle; like a broken toy his body swung and slipped from the verge into the torrent sullenly roaring below. So, after all, the last blow was struck for Lesendra.

Stefan Balsic dropped the pistol and looked into the eyes of the girl whose gaze had not left his face. She read there the success of the shot; and all success. Slowly his arm drew her; still on their knees, his blood staining them both, Delight laid her head on his naked shoulder from which the uniform hung in shreds, and took from him the kiss which sealed a marriage beyond divorce.

After a while she tore the hem from her white dress to bind the wound on his shoulder and improvise a sling for his broken arm. He had recovered consciousness only a few moments before the girl; in time to witness Michael's departure with his men, and to struggle to the height where she had found him. He told her Rupert had been taken with the retreating victors, unharmed, but a prisoner.

When he was able, they descended to that grim road. He would have left her where the gathering dusk veiled ugliness from her unaccustomed sight, but Delight would follow him in mercy as in justice. Together they sought his followers.

Of the eighteen who had ridden from the castle, they found six living; one of them the giant Petrovitch. He raised himself on his elbow to kiss his chief's hand, his broad face beaming with joy through streaks of sweat and blood as he uttered guttural ejaculations of welcome. He was able to add the final explanations. Michael had ordered the dead thrown into that omnivorous river

which took without restoring; and had restrained his fierce impatience to leave the place, long enough to have the living laid together in a strip of shade. Because one who was conscious begged for water, the girl in tawdry finery had brought a jug and left it with them. It had been enough; the hardy men had given each other such rough aid as would suffice them until help came from the castle. The cool night could be borne; with morning, or before, the soldiers from Podgoritza would surely come in answer to Delight's letter.

The master and mistress had little more in their power to give. When that little had been done, the two made their way back to the house that had been Michael Balsic's. There they found Lesendra. Delight, who had never seen death until then, took the lace scarf from her breast to shield Danilo's tranquil young face from the night. And because she thought it would help Stefan to know his cousin had died in the fulness of an ambition achieved, she told him the story of the beggar's jewel; and how Danilo Lesendra had found and made his gift, spending his own life to lay life like a red gem in his kinsman's hand.

"He gives, when I first value, life," Stefan answered, not meanly flinching from obligation, but according the rich gift its worth. "He knew I loved you, since the day I refused to yield you to Owen."

He was not able to carry Danilo within, nor would he consent not to watch that night beside

his cousin. On a bench before the door, Delight sat down with her husband to wait for morning.

Hours later, the moon rose. Weakness surmounted even Stefan Balsic's will. There came a time when the girl brought rugs from the house, spreading them on the ground, and drew down there the man whom stupor was gaining.

She herself must have crossed the borderland of sleep, at last.

In the pink dawn Delight awoke, or aroused, to find herself surrounded by strange soldiers. Opposite her was standing a tall and stately old man, a man with piercing, kindly eyes and a frank brow quick to cloud with severity and as quickly cleared. But there was no severity in the look he fixed on the fragile girl who sat on the door-sill of that sinister house and pillowed Stefan Balsic's head on her knees. And she looked at him without fear, her beautiful eyes wide to his, as bewilderment cleared from them. This was no friend of Michael's she knew. She was vaguely aware the old man had spoken to her in French, and so answered him in instinctive obedience.

"I am Delight Balsic," she heard herself saying, her voice a ripple of sound after the men's heavy tones. "This is my husband, wounded here, and my cousin Danilo Lesendra who is dead. Take us home, monsieur; I beg you to take us home."

So Delight, having become Montenegrin, met her King.

CHAPTER XXI

Fair Vistas

"Countess Délice, will you come down?"

"Down, Irenya Ivanovna?"

"Because Mr. Rupert asks of Lord Stefan that I may be his wife. It is a folly; nevertheless, I am afraid of what happens. If he said no—! For Mr. Rupert must return to that America, and would take me with him. From respect to Danilo he has waited."

Delight turned to the window, bright with sunset. It was a week since Danilo had come home; days since the departure of the prince who had stayed to honor him. She remembered the smiling young officer she had found cleaning his pistol, that first sunny noon. "We are always ready to meet the King, madame," he had told her. He had met the King for the last time, and showed him unstained steel. She glanced with quiet tenderness toward the garden beside the arcade. Neither she nor Stefan had the poor superstition that makes a horror of serene death; Danilo did not sleep out on the mountain desert, as he had once predicted to Rupert, but took his rest where he had lived.

"You are thinking of Danilo, Countess Délice," Irenya's red lips fluttered in a sigh, the dutiful

tribute of happy youth to one passed. "But he gave me to Mr. Rupert. Also those wicked men who did so much evil would have escaped, if Mr. Rupert had not called out to the soldiers from Podgoritza, when the two parties were passing in the dark night, so that they were all captured and punished. Was it not then well that he did so; and that the King was in Podgoritza when your letter came, and rode with the soldiers, so that he understood and gave authority for all?"

"Mr. Rupert is all you say, Irenya; more than any of us can find words to tell. Indeed he was Danilo's good comrade and our friend. Come, we will go down."

They went together, out into the castle that would always be home to Delight. However far she and Stefan wandered, wherever diplomatic life, his Russian and her American connections led them, this must be home.

In the arched hall Count Balsic and Rupert turned to meet the ladies. Both men smiled at the graceful picture made by the two who came hand in hand, but there was a touch of perplexity in the expression of Irenya's guardian.

"Come answer for yourself, Irenya," he greeted her, with his grave kindness. "I think you know what Mr. Rupert and I are discussing?"

Irenya lifted her small chin, half-closing her long blue eyes and glancing aslant at Rupert with

the provocative challenge and demureness of her kitten-look.

"I think we do," Delight answered for her companion, her own mouth dimpling.

"Mr. Rupert knows my respect for him and my willingness to give him the wife Danilo has already given. But it is right that I should say to you, Irenya, that my kinswoman might command a more brilliant marriage. I had arranged one for you with Danilo Lesendra. You may have a foreign title, if you choose it, or one of your own countrymen who holds a high place. I do not speak against Mr. Rupert; I ask you to think, and decide. Shall we give you time, little cousin?"

Irenya's bosom heaved, she drew the yellow braids across as if she would have sheltered the cream-and-rose face she only succeeded in framing with gold. But her eyes glinted sapphire lights of determination as she made her salute to both men.

"Certainly I need no time, with all good thanks," she fixed decision, in her never-failing placidity. "With Mr. Rupert I will go, to that America which is for women. And I will watch him in those automobiles and machines which fly, and there is no marriage more brilliant since he has such courage unafraid. Also," she turned a glance aside to the American, "I shall look straight

at him with eyes that meet, and I shall *not* kiss his hand."

"I guess *not!*" Rupert clenched equality, stepping beside her in triumphant possession. His black eyes resolute, he nodded perfect amity and understanding to the other man. "I ain't denying you were right in showing her both courses. She'll ride the long run with me; and I'm qualified to drive it straight, or I wouldn't take her. And I ain't likely to forget, either, that she might have had Lesendra. If his car had turned over on him, or his 'plane dropped— Well, I'm staying a day in Cetinje to see Josef gets hung, then I'll take her to New York. We'll stop off in Paris to buy her all the clothes I can see." His dark face lightened. "And when I get her on Broadway, the town will sit up to see Mrs. Jack Rupert! I ain't running an advertising bureau, but there is no such blonde hair in my city. No, she don't have a title, but queen she is and queen she stays."

Count Balsic held out his hand. Irenya turned a rosy face of beatitude to her lover, and shamelessly ignored etiquette by allowing him to take her out of the room.

The two who were left turned to each other with the quiet certainty of a confidence deep as life, smiling sympathy with the meteor of young love which had blazed across their path on a way of its

own. Stefan Balsic put his arm about his wife and drew her out to the balcony, in the fresh evening.

"Once I planned all this of mine, and the dream of the great Tsar, should descend to the children of Danilo and Irenya," he mused, after a while.

"She will be happy with her American, Stefan."

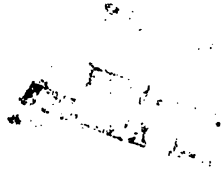
"Yes; and our kinsman is. But I shall call my first son Danilo."

Delight colored exquisitely. With him she looked across the splendid, lofty hills where the castle rested like a little boat among the land-billows, across to the Albanian mountains red in the sunset beyond the plain where a gleam of silver showed Scutari lake as a war-shield thrown down between the gladiator nations.

"We will teach him the Dream," she answered softly. "If we do not see it realized, he may. If he does not, he will teach it to the next."

They stood together, watching the evening crimson fade to delicate violet and gold. The violet deepened; just before the light went out they saw the Montenegrin peaks wrapped in purple, like the fairy raiment of an unreal empire still to be won, yet glimpsed across the dark.

THE END.



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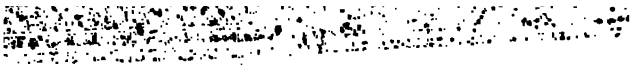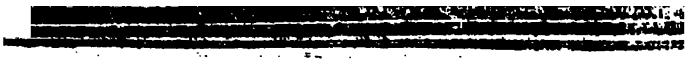
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